

The Phenomenon of Child Marriage Among Muslims in Ghana: Focus on Wala Muslims within Wa Municipality, Ghana



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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the phenomenon of child marriage among Wala Muslims within Wa Municipality in Ghana. The study was largely informed by the popular perception that the phenomenon of child marriage is more common in the northern parts of Ghana and that the Islamic culture endorses it. The study focused on the Wala Muslims as a result of several reasons. Among these reasons is that the Wa Municipality in northern Ghana is predominantly a Muslim settlement and is regarded as a poverty-endemic area. Previous studies on the Wala people have focused on their history, Islam and social change. However, the role of religion, poverty, illiteracy, and their influence on child marriage seems to escape scholarly attention. Hence, the a need for this study. The author employed a multi-faceted approach to examine the issues. Both primary and secondary sources of data were analysed. The article argued that child marriage is not widely practised in the study area. It is not also endorsed by Islam. Notwithstanding there were manifestations of child marriage practices in various forms. The study recommended that steps should be taken to educate the Muslim public on child marriage issues. The study contributes to knowledge of child marriage in the context of the Wala Muslim setting which received no or very minimal scholarly attention.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of child marriage which is commonly defined as marriage before 18 years of age has been a major policy issue in many countries of which Ghana is no exception. In recent times, studies on child marriage have been attracting renewed interest and worth academic interest. It has been estimated that about 700 million women were married before 18 years worldwide. Compounding this statistic was that one in three of these women (250 million) were married before the age of 15. Globally, each year, 15 million girls marry before their 18th birthday. The implication is that each day, 41,000 girls get married, and every minute 28 girls below age 18 get married, with a girl getting married every two seconds.¹ This study was built on existing literature from various researchers.² It has been argued that one out of four

¹ Elizabeth Nahamya, "Child, Early, and Forced Marriages (CEFM) in the Commonwealth: The Role of the Judiciary," *Commonwealth Law Bulletin* 43, no. 1 (2017): 111–44.

² Olayinka Oluwakemi Adeniyi, *Legal Protection of the Girl Child Against Child Marriage (Aure Yarinya) in Nigeria* (University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2016); Philippe Ariaès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (Vintage Books, 1962); Ruth Michael

girls in the Upper Regions of Ghana will be married before their 18th birthday. These regions have the highest prevalence rate of 39.20 per cent of girl-child marriages.³ In the case of the Upper West region, it is believed that the rate of child marriages hovered around 36.3%. It is also claimed that girls from the Upper East, Upper West and Northern regions of Ghana are usually given out in marriage at very young ages against their will. The girls are forced to marry men old enough to be their fathers or grandfathers. However, many of the girls escape from their so-called marital homes to the southern part of Ghana. They settle in the two major cities, Kumasi and Accra. In these two cities, most of them become head porters popularly called "KAYAYEI" in Ghana, and live in slums.

In Ghana, there is a widespread perception that child marriage is more common with people from the northern parts of the country and that Islamic culture endorses it. On the other hand, previous studies on Wala people have focused on their history, Islam, and social change.⁴ Similarly, other researchers have explored the practice of child marriage and gender-related issues in Muslim communities.⁵ What is lacking in the analysis of these scholars is that they employed broader terms and scopes which do not allow for precision in their analysis.

Furthermore, Wala Municipality is a predominantly Muslim settlement, and the Islamic culture shapes the social orientation of the people. To what extent the practice of child marriage is a religious or an Islamic issue has not attracted much scholarly work. While some scholars and writers argue that child marriage is a practice in some Muslim communities it is yet to be established whether it is influenced by religious or cultural factors.⁷ A study of the Wala community will be illuminating to highlight the multi-causal and the power dynamics in the practice of child marriage. Furthermore, the periods in which the research was conducted and now more than decades today, could have also created a knowledge gap. However, there has been no marginal interest in research works about child marriage. This has prompted the need for this research to ascertain the reality underpinning the state of child marriage, the causes and the power politics associated with its understanding and related practices.

This study builds on previous scholarly works by offering a new perspective on the phenomenon of child marriage with a focus on Wa municipality and its surrounding communities. The research gaps in the previous scholarly works are all over and require further investigation. The outcome of the study is structured in two broad headings namely, conceptualizing a child in Wala culture and the nature and causes of child marriage in Wa Municipality. Issues discussed under the nature and causes of child marriage in Wa Municipality include poverty-related child marriage, community-specific child marriage, moral and teenager pregnancy justification of child marriage, and arranged marriage among others. It is followed by a conclusion and recommendations.

Kanyangu, "Factors Contribute to Early Marriage among Teenagers in Rural Areas in Kasulu District Council" (The Open University of Tanzania, 2014); Margaret E Greene and Ellen Stiefvater, "Social and Gender Norms and Child Marriage," *Advanced Learning and Information on Gender Norms*, 2019; Muazzam Nasrullah, "Child Marriage and Its Impact on Maternal and Child Health in Pakistan," 2015; Rosmarie Zapfl-Helbling, *Force Marriage and Child Marriage* (Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 2005), <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=10969>; Kate Kow Adoo-Adeku, *Gender Education and Development, Issues and Concerns for Action* (Accra: Akrong Publication Limited, 2012).

³ Daily Graphic, 21st March, 2016.

⁴ Ivor Wilks, *Wa and the Wala: Islam and Polity in Northwestern Ghana*, vol. 63 (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Nehemia Levtzion, "Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa: A Study of Islam in the Middle Volta Basin in the Pre-Colonial Period," 1968; Bin Salih Mohammed, *Our Cultural Heritage, Some Aspects of Customary Law, Usage and Tradition of the Wala* (Accra: Salihsons, 2009); Aloysius Nuolabong, "Islam and the Dagaaba of the Upper West Region of Ghana, CE 1400-2008" (University of Cape Coast, 2013).

⁵ Tonja Khabir, *The Role of Islam in Childhood Marriage Case Study Nigeria*, Paper presented at the 17th Annual Convention on Global Awareness Society International, Sanfrancisco, 2008; Arifa Hudda, *The religion of Islam and Marriage, the Islamic Marriage Guide* Qum, 1997 p. 5; David Liepert, *Rejecting the Myth of Sanctioned Child Marriage in Islam*, 2011; Asghar Ali Engineer *Child Marriage and Islam*, Mumbai, Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, 2012; Myriam Francois-Cerah, *The Truth about Muhammed and Aisha*, BST Published, 2012.

⁶ Tonja Khabir, "The Role of Islam in Childhood Marriage Case Study: Nigeria," in *A Paper Presented at the 17th Annual Convention of the Global Awareness Society International, San Francisco, CA, USA, On, 2008*, 17–20; A Hudda, *The Religion of Al-Islam and Marriage* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=gaR0tAEACAAJ>; Myriam Francois-Cerrah, "The Truth about Muhammad and Aisha," *The Guardian* 17 (2012).

⁷ Susanna Osam, *Violence against Women in Ghana: An Analysis of Cases Presented in the Print Media* (ABANTU for Development, 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic writers like Bicchieri argue that social norms create conditional behavioural preferences, and people's behaviour is often influenced by what other people do or think should be done. According to Kanyangu, in communities where child marriage is prevalent, there is a strong social pressure on families to conform to the practice. Failure to conform can result in ridicule, disapproval, or family shame. She believes early marriage eradication might be hindered if traditions and belief systems that encourage the practice are not effectively addressed.⁸ Elyyasu wrote on child marriage in the Wala Community.⁹ However, he did not address the Wala social setting particularly their marriage system in relation to child marriage, an area that escaped scholarly attention. Elyyasu also claimed that Muslims made up 65.9% per cent of the Wala population in the Municipality. However, he failed to address the perceived Islamic influence on child marriage. It also appears Elyyasu focused on early marriage rather than child marriage.

METHODOLOGY

A multi-faceted approach was used to examine the issues. In line with the qualitative approach, both primary and secondary sources of data were used in the analysis of issues. The instruments used for primary data collection include in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation among others. The informants were purposively selected.¹⁰ They included public workers and NGOs working on child rights-related issues, Imams, *Ulamau* Muslim scholars, married and unmarried people, child marriage victims, students, and women groups among others. In all, they were about 45. Voluntary participation was the ethical consideration. Respondents participated based on informed consent. Interviews were conducted in *Wale* (the language of the Wala people) and translated into English.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualizing a Child in Wala Culture

Here the study analyses a child in Wala culture. Understanding the concept of child attracted conflicting meanings. In the Ghanaian context in general, the meaning of a child may include the period before puberty rites, a period in school, a period of learning a trade, a period when decisions are made for a young person, or a period when a young person is living under the same roof of their parents among others.¹¹ In the Wala culture being a child is not static. A child can be conceptualized either based on cultural or chronological. Culturally, adulthood is mostly tied to first menstruation, sometimes the growth of a beard served as a sign of adulthood. In the past ability of a child to independently shoulder responsibilities such as fetching water from the river, ability to cook, or preparing food without the assistance of any adult marked the end of childhood.¹² With regards to the male child's ability, to work independently on the farm or own a farm or ability to undertake a trade of any kind marked the beginning of adulthood.¹³ A chronological definition of a child can be viewed from an individual's date of birth and age which is very recent. In the past dates of birth were determined by events as a result of a lack of birth certificates and other relevant documents to show the actual date of birth.¹⁴ In this context, age is inconsequential in marking off the end of childhood and the commencement of adulthood. In other words, the age fixed at 18 as the end of childhood seems to be a new trend in Wala culture and tradition. The same applies to the role of the child.

The Nature and Causes of Child Marriage in the Wa Municipality

The analysis of the origin of the Wala people has shown that Wala are heterogeneous people who together establish one ethnicity. Wala recognised two types of marriage: *Nabihi* /*Tengdaamba* (royal/ custodians

⁸ Kanyangu, "Factors Contribute to Early Marriage among Teenagers in Rural Areas in Kasulu District Council," 12.

⁹ Adel Elyyasu, "Early Marriage in the Wa Municipality: Perspective and Implementation" (University for Development Studies, 2020).

¹⁰ Charles Kivunja, "Distinguishing between Theory, Theoretical Framework, and Conceptual Framework: A Systematic Review of Lessons from the Field.," *International Journal of Higher Education* 7, no. 6 (2018): 44–53.

¹¹ Mr. Abu Walee Master, Prince retired educationist, former teacher of Wala language at Wa SHS, interviewed, Kpagory, 16th March 2019.

¹² Aishah Abdullah Laiya, interviewed Wa Dondoli Faamuni 29th June, 2019.

¹³ Hajia Hawau Mohammed, Upper West Regional Chairperson, Federation of Muslim Women Association of Ghana (FOMWAG), Member, women Dawah Committee Sumaaly Radio, interviewed Wa, Jongo, 30th June, 2019.

¹⁴ Alhaji Sufyani Copra, family head Kayanjaka, Dodoli interviewed, Kayanjaka, Dodoli, 17th March, 2019.

of land) type of marriage and *Yarihi* (Muslims) type of marriage. The *Yarihi* type of marriage is widely practised in metropolitan Wa. It is mostly influenced by Islamic traditions mixed with cultural practices. The *Nabihi/Tendaamba* type is practised in rural Wa and is influenced by the culture and tradition of the people. In both marriages, there was what is known as *peybahi* (infant engagement) in the Wala tradition. This is where a man may give a gift to a pregnant woman with the intention that if she gives birth to a baby girl, she will be his future wife.¹⁵ The findings further encapsulate that contrary to the widespread perception that the phenomenon of child marriage is common in the Wala Muslim community. The practice of child marriage is not common in the study area. It is not also influenced by Islamic principles. This notwithstanding, there were manifestations of child marriage practices in various forms which include. Poverty-Related Child Marriage (PRCM), moral and Teenage Pregnancy Justification of Child Marriage (TPRCM), Arranged Child Marriage (ACM) and Community-Specific Child Marriage (CSCM) among others as detailed below.

Poverty-Related Child Marriage

Poverty-related child marriage takes place in various forms. In metropolitan Wa, it happened in the name of educational and financial support after the marriage. A number of girls were found schooling at various levels of education, universities, colleges, and Senior High Schools (SHS) particularly those who qualified to enter tertiary institutions, but their families were financially challenged. Some girls around 16 years of age were in a relationship with men who promised to marry them, and their relatives were aware of and approved of the relationship. As a result, the men were taking care of their educational and other needs at the school.¹⁶ Such marriages were viewed as blessings for the girls and their families because it would enable them to achieve their dreams of having a high education.¹⁷

In this article, such marriages are referred to as poverty-motivated child marriages. This is because of the conditional clause of “if you accept my proposal, I will assist you to continue your education.” In such a situation, the possible explanation is that people may accept proposals based on their interest in achieving their educational goals rather than marriage. This kind of poverty-associated marriage is practised mostly in urban Wa.

During the field study, a man who had married a girl of junior high school (JHS) background and assisted her in furthering her education at SHS and up to the tertiary level was interviewed. At the time of this interview, the girl, now a woman, was a qualified teacher.¹⁸ Several girls were able to get better higher education through child marriage. Some were working in various public and private institutions. This trend can be referred to as the positive angle of child marriage in this article. The other form of poverty associated with child marriage comes as a result of parents' inability to take care of their children. For instance, if parents are not able to provide the basic needs for their wards, particularly the girl child and a man, most at times older than the girl, with questionable character can meet those needs, the probability for the girl to follow that man is high and in such a case the parent may lose control of the child, and this may lead to child marriage. The basic needs here could be food, hygiene materials such as sanitary pads, clothing footwear, among others.¹⁹ Sometimes it is not only parents' inability to provide for their wards because of poverty but the worst thing is that some parents sometimes particularly those in rural communities, depend on their wards for financial assistance, especially the girl child. For example, a child may go out and come home with a device such as a mobile phone. Instead of asking how the girl came by the phone, some parents would rather collect the device and use it. In some cases, some parents demand money from their underage and unemployed children, thus, contributing to the materialistic quest of the children, which may result in child marriage.²⁰ This is a kind of child marriage practice in rural Wa.

¹⁵ Alhaji Sufyani Copral, family head Kayanjaka, Dodoli interviewed, Kayanjaka, Dondoli, 17th March 2019.

¹⁶ Wa Islamic Senior High School Girls, interviewed, Islamic Senior High School Girls, Wa 2nd July, 2019.

¹⁷ Sheikh Ahmad Yakub, Islamic Cleric, interviewed, 10th Kumbiyahi Wa 10th March, 2019.

¹⁸ Sheikh Ahmad Yakub, Islamic Cleric, interviewed, 10th Kumbiyahi Wa 10th March, 2019.

¹⁹ Wa Islamic Senior High School Girls, interviewed, Islamic Senior High School Girls, Wa 2nd July, 2019.

²⁰ Umar Issah, Wa Municipal Department of Social Welfare and Community Development officer, interviewed Social Welfare office, 26th July, 2019.

Community-Specific Child Marriage

Communities such as Junga, Busa, Boli, and Kpognu were identified as child marriage-prone areas. At Zingu, for example, it revealed that underage marriage was normal among the people of the community. A study conducted among 30 Junior High School girls at Junga discovered that about 12 out of the number appear to have experienced child marriage-related issues.²¹ In the same community, there were about four (4) attempted child marriage cases, and the education outfit intervened. In the year 2018, an underage girl was about to be given out for marriage. The office was given a hint because it would jeopardize the education of the girl. The education directorate stopped the planned marriage. The boy's father insulted the officers for the role they played. The people believed that girls aged between 14 and 15 years are women and are due for marriage. It is a norm and widely accepted by the people within that community. In one of the schools within the district, an investigation revealed that about seven girls were given out for marriage within one year. This was the rate of child marriage in the area. However, the intervention of institutions such as UNICEF, the Muslim Relief Association of Ghana (MURAG), and the Ministry of Gender's sensitization and other educational activities were undertaken by stakeholders, and it has reduced the rate of child marriage to some extent.²²

Moral and Teenager Pregnancy Justification of Child Marriage

The keyword under this discussion is morality. Morality, the Latin word "*moralis*", means customs or manners. It is a code of conduct put forward by a group or society, which distinguishes one from another. Morality can be applied in many aspects such as religious morality, morality and nature, individual morality, and social morality, among others.²³ Though morality is difficult to define, under the moral justification of child marriage (MJCM), two kinds of children were identified. Those who cannot control their sexual behaviour can have sexual intercourse with men while still underage. With such girls, there is no need not to allow them to marry due to age; because they are already married outside of formal marriage. However, those underage children who can control their sexual desire as permitted in Islam should not be allowed to marry at an early age but should be given the necessary support and assistance to maximise their personal development in every endeavour they choose, whether in formal education or to learn some kind of trade.²⁴

According to Hajia Aminah Alhaji Saed, "Girls who can manage themselves morally when it comes to sexual relationships should be assisted to advance in their personal development."²⁵ However, when an underage child can no longer stand upright with regard to a sexual relationship as required by Islam, there is no need to keep such a girl out of marriage because of age. In a related development, a teenager is an individual in the transitional stage of development between childhood and full adulthood, representing the period during which a person is biologically adult but emotionally not fully matured. In this context, a teenager is aged between 13-19 years. Pregnancy on the other hand is the state in which a fetus develops in the uterus of a woman of childbearing age during the period from conception to birth.²⁶ Teenage pregnancy is an unintended pregnancy during adolescence.²⁷

The investigation further shows that teenage pregnancy is related to child marriage, and it is a growing concern. An interviewee observed a JHS student who always refused to join her colleagues for

²¹ Umar Issah, Wa Municipal Department of Social Welfare and Community Development officer, interviewed Social Welfare office, 26th July, 2019.

²² Madam Rafeeqah Mohammed In charge of Girl Child Education, Ghana Education Service, Wa East District, interviewed Wa, 5th December, 2019.

²³ George Anderson, 'Religion and Morality in Ghana: A Reflection' in *Global Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.1, No.3 pp.162-170, European Centre for Research Training and Development UK 2013.

²⁴ Sheikh Mashood Mohakhtar, Islamic cleric, Arabic teacher an Imam ASWAJ, interviewed, Adabiyah, Wa 10th March, 2019.

²⁵ Hajia Aminah Alhaji Saed, Islamic theologian, local marriage councillor, Member, women Dawah Committee Sumaaly Radio Wa, interviewed, Wa Jongo, 15 September, 2019.

²⁶ Patricia Draper, "African Marriage Systems: Perspectives from Evolutionary Ecology," *Ethology and Sociobiology* 10, no. 1-3 (1989): 145-69.

²⁷ Juliana Coughlin, "Teenage Pregnancy in Ghana: Assessing Situation and Moving Forward," *Graphic Online*, 2016.

the extra classes after 3:00 pm for some time. One day, she asked the girl why she was not joining her peers for the extra classes. The girl of about 15 years said she always rushes home to breastfeed her child.²⁸ In a related development, a respondent indicated that “A brother’s daughter a JHS student, was impregnated by an unemployed boy; after they met with the boy and his family, the only solution we arrived at was to normalize the marriage between the boy and girl.”²⁹ The above statement may also support claims made by this respondent that those girls who get pregnant in the Muslim community are made to marry men who impregnate them, which is a form of child marriage.

Arranged Marriage

The study also uncovered arranged marriages among the Wala, where parents may arrange marriages with someone they prefer and convince their son or daughter to accept such an arrangement. It is almost taboo for a son or daughter to reject such arrangements because it is believed that the elders are well-versed and experienced in marital issues. Therefore, adhering to their advice is premium to the success of a marriage. In the past, some women were given out for marriage at the age of 16.

The marriage did not in any way affect their development based on the condition at the time. In those days, most girls in the community were not sent to school.³⁰ Hajia Hawau Mohammed stated “In this modern age, some parents sometimes arrange such marriages with the consent of the girls, when necessary. For example, the family of this Junior High School pupil arranged marriage for her with the girls' consent at seventeen years of age. After the ceremony, the girl continued her education until she completed JHS and joined her husband abroad. The question unanswered is whether a 17-year-old girl can legally consent to marry. Similarly, this JHS girl was doing well both at home and in school, unfortunately, the girl’s parent arranged with a man in the community who married her. Further investigation revealed that the practice was a norm by the people of the community.”³¹ Another respondent gave an example of “a man who also wanted to give his 14-year-old daughter in JHS 2 for marriage. Her family was advised not to do that. They accepted the advice, and the girl was allowed to continue her education. However, the man was not happy because of the intervention.”³²

The study shows that officiating Imams and marriage counsellors do not ask about people their age before marriage during premarital counselling at the local level. Imams and marriage counsellors assume that when potential marriage partners appear before them during premarital counselling, the potential marriage partners are of age and it is not necessary to ask for their ages.³³ A possible explanation of the above is that age is not a precondition for marriage in the Wala community. This does not in any way suggest that a 5-year child can be given out in marriage. Although people often use religion, for that matter, Islam to justify child marriage practices, it was revealed that Islam does not endorse child marriage. However, traditional practices were also identified as one of the causes of child marriage. The implication was that child marriage may be culture-related rather than religious.

Discussion Summary

In summary, the study found that apart from the legal meaning of a child fixed at 18 years, the understanding of the concept of a child attracted conflicting meanings. The practice of child marriage though not common in the study area, is influenced by socioeconomic conditions of the people than Islamic culture. The study does not and cannot claim to have covered everything on child marriage due to the broad nature of the subject. Having analysed the phenomenon of child marriage, some recommendations were made as presented below.

²⁸ Dr. Sheikh Seeba Osuman, Islamic scholar an Imam and a teacher, Wa SHS, interviewed 16th March, 2019

²⁹ Ustaz Ibrahim Watar, Upper West Regional Chief Imam, ASWAJ interviewed, Wa Zongo 9th March, 2019

³⁰ Hajia Hawau Mohammed, Upper West Regional Chairperson, Federation of Muslim Women Association of Ghana (FMWAG), Member, women Dawah Committee Sumaaly Radio, interviewed Wa, Jongo, 30th June, 2019.

³¹ Hajia Hawau Mohammed, interviewed Wa, Jongo, 30th June, 2019.

³² Hajar Sulih, Mualimah, Islamic cleric, social communicator and a marriage councillor, interviewed, Wa Jahan, 28th July, 2019

³³ Hajia Ameenah Alhaji Saed, Islamic Cleric, Local marriage councillor, a preacher on Wa based rador Sumaly FM Station, interviewed, Wa Jongo, 15th September, 2019.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To begin, the study recommends that the religious and traditional authorities, teachers, and others, be given adequate training and assisted with incentives to enable them to deal with issues of child marriage with dispatch. Therefore, child marriage awareness and volunteer training programs should be established to enhance education on the policy. Women, especially those in rural areas should be empowered with microcredit schemes to enable them to go into small-scale businesses to generate income for their daily expenses and support their families. Increasing parents' general financial ability will include; improved skills and business development. It could mean support with seed money to establish sustainable jobs. This will enable them to cater for their children to attend school thereby reducing child marriage. Similarly, the promotion of livelihood support for a needy girl in schools or those learning any kind of trade will be an antidote to child marriage.

Also, promoting adolescent reproductive health education, providing health care services for teenagers, and promoting suitable and economically accessible birth control methods may help curb teenage pregnancy associated with child marriages. International bodies such as the United Nations, ECOWAS, and others, should increase funding to governments and reliable NGOs to organise more workshops to equip communities with skills to reduce child marriage. Researchers in child marriage-related issues should be given financial support to carry on more research on the subject.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the perception that child marriage is more common in the study area and that the Islamic culture endorses it. The study shows that child marriage has no specific characteristic. Its nature keeps changing. The practice is more of a culture and socio-economic conditions of the people than the Islamic culture. Beyond the negative effects of child marriage raised by previous studies. This work also documented some positive angles of child marriage, a trend called the positive aspect of child marriage in this article. Several girls were able to get better higher education through child marriage. Some were working in various institutions. In view of the above, eliminating child marriage practices requires a combination of actions and multi-stakeholder involvement. Therefore, the above key recommendations were made for implementation and to generate interest for further study.

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