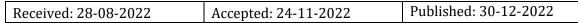
LENTERA: JURNAL ILMU DAKWAH DAN KOMUNIKASI Vol. VI, No. 2, Desember 2022 doi: https://doi.org/10.21093/lentera https://journal.uinsi.ac.id/index.php/lentera P-ISSN: 2549-7391, E-ISSN: 2549-578X



Spiritual Communication of Selakaran Among Sasak Muslim Community During The Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unparalleled challenges to individuals worldwide, resulting in substantial alterations in lifestyles. These alterations encompass the adoption of health protocols, such as social distancing and frequent handwashing. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that certain Sasak Muslim communities have opted for a distinctive approach in confronting the pandemic. Their chosen strategy revolves around the performance of rituals. These rituals, executed collectively, are perceived by the Sasak Muslim community as a means to counteract the global COVID-19 pandemic. To comprehensively explore the significance of these rituals within the Sasak Muslim community's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this qualitative research employs an ethnographic approach. The overarching goal is to gain insight into how these rituals are construed and employed by the community. The study's findings unveil that the Sasak Muslim community perceives the pandemic as a typical ailment, one that can be alleviated through a deepened connection with Allah. One of the primary methods through which this closeness is sought is an increased engagement in dhikr, which involves the remembrance of Allah, and prayers performed within the framework of specific rituals such as Selakaran.

Keywords: Selakaran, Ritual Communication, Sasak, Pandemic.

Abstrak

Pandemi COVID-19 telah membawa tantangan yang belum pernah terjadi sebelumnya yang mengakibatkan perubahan yang signifikan dalam gaya hidup dari orang-orang di seluruh dunia. Perubahan-perubahan ini mencakup adopsi protokol kesehatan, seperti menjaga jarak sosial dan mencuci tangan secara berkala. Pandemi juga mendapatkan respon yang beragam, salah satunya adalah respon dari beberapa komunitas Muslim Sasak yang memilih pendekatan yang berbeda dalam menghadapi pandemi ini. Strategi yang mereka pilih berkisar pada pelaksanaan ritual-ritual. Ritual-ritual ini, yang dilakukan secara bersama-sama, dipandang oleh komunitas Muslim Sasak sebagai cara untuk mengatasi pandemi COVID-19 secara global. Untuk secara komprehensif dapat memahami signifikansi ritual-ritual ini dalam kaitannya dengan respons komunitas Muslim Sasak terhadap pandemi COVID-19, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-etnografi. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami bagaimana ritual-ritual ini dipahami dan digunakan oleh komunitas tersebut. Temuan dari studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa komunitas Muslim Sasak memandang pandemi ini sebagai penyakit biasa, yang dapat diatasi melalui membangun hubungan yang lebih dalam dengan Allah. Salah satu metode utama untuk mencapai kedekatan ini adalah dengan meningkatkan dhikr kepada Allah dan doa-doa yang dilakukan dalam kerangka ritual tertentu seperti Selakaran.

Kata kunci: Komunikasi ritual, pandemi, dan selakaran.

A. Introduction

Communication is one of the fundamental human needs. By communication humans express themselves and express what they feel. Through communication, humans can meet the hierarchy of their needs in the form of clothing, food, security, and self-actualization. Communication as a process of sending messages from communicators to communicants is often used as a medium of meeting the need for a sense of security including from various diseases that come to befall humans. With communication man can identify and prevent himself from contracting the disease.

Ritual communication represents a distinct form of symbol exchange centered around specific beliefs concerning higher entities. To grasp the components inherent in spiritually infused communication, it's crucial to position the human experience within a collective realm, transcending individual boundaries. The interplay between humans and their surrounding environment forms an inseparable unity (Platt 2012). Amid this interactive process, rituals emerge as a vital medium for communication, enabling the pursuit of individual identity—a recognition of both God's presence, collective belonging, and interconnectedness within the vast universe. Through ritual communication, individuals and communities demonstrate their dedication to upholding the traditions cherished within their respective societies. Ritual communication, as delineated by Deddy Mulyana, intricately intertwines with expressive communication, commonly enacted collectively within a community. Within ritual communication, individuals articulate words or enact behaviors laden with symbolism. Activities like reciting prayers, chants, or specific gestures underscore the collective and individual dedication to familial, tribal, and religious customs. Through rituals, emotional connections are fostered among neighbors, acting as a societal cohesive force among group constituents. Consequently, rituals yield twofold advantages: first, instilling a perception of structure (a sense of order), and second, furnishing a source of security through predictability (a sense of comfort).

Rituals share a close connection with longstanding societal habits perpetuated across generations. They revolve around voluntary actions undertaken by individuals with the intent of symbolizing an impact on their lives. Rothenbuhler's perspective describes ritual as the deliberate engagement in behavior exhibiting a well-defined pattern, executed to symbolically influence or engage in significant aspects of life (Rothenbuhler 1998:147).

Rituals possess a range of distinctive characteristics. They involve purposeful performances, requiring conscious and willing participation. Often, rituals contain elements of irrationality while serving as expressions of collective engagement. Through rituals, social relations are symbolically conveyed, often employing subjunctive rather than indicative language. The potency of symbols within rituals is evident, as they carry condensed meanings (Fahrurrozi 2016). Expressive or aesthetic behaviors are common, encompassing customary and regularly recurring actions. Communication during rituals goes beyond information exchange, while sacred significance is inherent in many rituals. Ritual constitutes a form of communication, rendering all variations of ritual inherently communicative. Within rituals, a symbolic message is consistently present. Ritual, being a vehicle for message conveyance and communication, is denoted as "ritual communication." This term was initially introduced by J.W. Carey in 1992. In his conceptualization of ritual communication, Carey underscores the association of communication with terms such as "sharing," "participation," "association," "fellowship," and "the possession of a common faith" (Carey, 1992:85).

From a ritual standpoint, this implies that communication is intertwined with notions of sharing, active engagement, forming connections, nurturing camaraderie, and embracing a common belief. Within the realm of rituals, communication doesn't solely aim to distribute messages across space; rather, its primary objective revolves around nurturing and sustaining a communal bond within a specific period (Telle 2009). In this context, communication is constructed not as a means of delivering information, but rather as a mechanism for symbolizing and reinstating collective trust.

Lombok Island stands as one of the prominent landmasses within the NTB Province. This island predominantly accommodates a population that identifies with Islam (Muslims). According to the population census carried out by the Central Statistics Agency of NTB, approximately 96.80% of Lombok Island's inhabitants follow the Islamic faith, while the remaining populace adheres to Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism, and Confucianism (BPS NTB, 2020).

The island of Lombok has earned the moniker "the island of a thousand mosques" due to its substantial Muslim population. This sobriquet was coined by President Suharto during his visit to Lombok, where he observed a multitude of mosques scattered across the island. Nearly every hamlet on Lombok boasts a mosque, with some even having two, underscoring the island's strong Islamic presence. The significant Muslim populace on Lombok Island also establishes a discernible pattern in addressing diverse societal dynamics, including the challenges posed by pandemics. The Muslim community's response extends beyond the realm of medical and clinical considerations. It's worth noting that coastal communities often exhibit a tendency toward openness and rationality when confronting the complexities of their environment (Satria, A. 2015).

Selakaran constitutes a pivotal ritual within the Sasak Muslim community. Typically observed on the eve of Prophet Muhammad's birthday during the month of Rabi'ul Awal in the Hijri calendar, Selakaran holds particular significance. While traditionally associated with the month of Maulid, this ritual also finds application in various other contexts, such as for specific ceremonies like ngurisang and sailing, or as a ritual to avert adversity (tolak bala).

The book utilized in inter-religious activities is known as "al-Barzanji." The Sasak community employs the Kitab al-Barzanji, a text penned by Sayyid Ja'far al-Barzanji. In the preface of his book, it becomes apparent that he adheres to Sunni beliefs and follows a particular order. Hailing from Egypt, al-Barzanji held the position of Qadhi of the Maliki school in Medina. This book, presumed to be authored in the 18th century AD, was initially published in Egypt.

At its core, the book titled Iqd al Jawahir (Jewelry Necklace), although some scholars attribute it to Iqdul Jawhar fi Maulid an Nabiyyil Azhar. However, over time, this work became widely recognized as al-Barzanji due to the name being derived from the location "al Barzanji Arkad" (Kurdistan). This literary creation by al-Barzanji was crafted with the intention of invigorating Islamic spirit and fostering affection for Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Through this book, Muslims strive to emulate the Prophet's persona, mirroring his conduct, traits, and ethics. Historically, this book was conceived as a commemoration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. During the era of Salahuddin al-Ayyubi, this observance was initially established to rekindle the spirits of Muslims who had faced a decline in their sense of unity and resilience. This was a period when Muslims confronted European crusader assaults, particularly from France, Germany, and England, collectively known as the Crusades. Under these circumstances, Sultan Salahuddin orchestrated the celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birth as a means to inspire the Muslim populace.

As part of this commemoration, a competition was organized, encouraging participants to craft narratives and praises about the Prophet in eloquent prose. All scholars and writers were extended an invitation to partake in this endeavor. Remarkably, the inaugural victor of this competition was Sheikh Ja'far al-Barzanji. This marked the inception of the book's legacy.

The commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday, orchestrated under the guidance of Sultan Salahuddin, yielded remarkable outcomes. The fervor among Muslims, which had waned in the face of the Crusades, was revitalized. Sultan Salahuddin's efforts to consolidate strength culminated in the momentous recapture of Jerusalem in 1187 AD/583 H from European control. The recaptured city included the enduring presence of the al-Aqsa Mosque.

Over time, Kitab Al-Barzanji has transcended geographical boundaries, permeating throughout various Arab and Muslim regions. It is not only recited during the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday observance but has also become an integral part of numerous religious ceremonies and cultural rituals, woven into the fabric of people's lives.

Hence, the objective of this research is to delve into the Selakaran procession and its community implementation within North Lombok Regency, particularly in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

Numerous previous researchers have explored the field, and several noteworthy studies are highlighted here. One such study was conducted by Siti Maryam, focusing on the "Selakaran Tradition as a Hajj Ritual in Kembang Kerang Daya Village of West Nusa Tenggara." This qualitative descriptive research delved into the Selakaran tradition's role as a hajj ritual in Kembang Kerang Daya village. The study centered on understanding the implementation of Selakaran activities as a hajj ritual, identifying factors influencing the tradition's evolution, and examining its impact on the religious behavior of the local population.

The study's findings revealed that Selakaran, as a hajj ritual, is deemed obligatory for those preparing for hajj. The tradition involves prayers, dhikr (remembrance of God), and supplication, which are believed to bestow tranquility upon the heart, bring blessings to life, and provide benefits for Hajj pilgrims. These benefits encompass safe travels, good health, enhanced enthusiasm for worship, and the attainment of a mabrur (accepted) Hajj pilgrimage.

Another pertinent study exploring the role of Selakaran was carried out by Wirman Hardi Gunawan in 2017. The core objective of this research was to delineate the structure, significance, and purpose encapsulated within the translated text of the Selakaran verse. The study investigated the translated text of Selakaran verse by employing structural analysis, semiotics theory, and functional theory.

The study's outcomes underscored that the translation of the Selakaran verse employed words denoting both synonyms and homonyms. The Batulayar community incorporated the Selakaran verse into three distinct traditions: Nyunatang, Hajj, and Ngurisang. Both of these studies concentrated on illuminating the role of diversity within the three traditions of the Sasak people. In contrast, the current study aims to unveil an additional perspective regarding the potential use of Selakaran as a ritual to address the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. This research endeavors to introduce a fresh outlook on the Selakaran tradition, expanding its significance beyond its traditional connections to hajj rituals, nyunatang, or ngurisang ceremonies.

B. Method

This study employs qualitative research methods, specifically employing ethnographic approaches, to gain insights into phenomena from the perspectives of the study participants. According to Creswell, ethnography is a research strategy that seeks to comprehensively investigate a cultural group within its natural environment over an extended period. This approach involves the collection of primary data through observations and interviews.

Furthermore, ethnographic approaches exhibit a remarkable degree of flexibility, adapting to the evolving circumstances encountered in the field. In this particular study, the research subjects are drawn from the Sasak Muslim community residing in Menggala village. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, adhering to specific criteria, including: 1) resilience, 2) active engagement in Selakaran, and 3) involvement in the Selakaran ritual. Thus, the central focus of this investigation is the examination of the rituals practiced by the Sasak Muslim community in the village in response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This research was conducted in Menggala village, situated in the Pemenang District within North Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) Province. Data for this study were gathered through two distinct methods: participatory observation, involving the researcher's immersive involvement in the entire ritual procession, and structured interviews conducted with religious leaders and community members who actively participated in the rituals within the confines of Menggala village in North Lombok regency

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Selakaran Prosesion

Selakaran constitutes one of the regularly conducted religious activities within the Muslim community of Menggala village. Typically held on Thursdays (Friday nights), this ritual observance predominantly takes place during the month of Rabi'ul Awal, coinciding with the commemoration of Prophet Muhammad's Birthday. Nevertheless, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an adjustment in the frequency of Selakaran observances. While traditionally conducted on specific occasions, the Sasak Muslim community found it necessary to engage in this ritual on a weekly rotating basis during the pandemic, thus increasing its regularity.

This activity serves as a proactive measure aimed at averting calamities from affecting the community, effectively warding off potential threats or reinforcements, as elucidated by the informant, Mahrip.

"In addition, as a way we reject reinforcements, this pandemic is an ordeal inflicted on us. So with the holding of this selakran activity we hope to be kept away from disasters by Allah SWT."

Selakaran is a multifaceted ritual comprised of three distinct stages: *Mesilaq*, Selakar, and *Grinding*. Mesilaq marks the initial phase in the Selakaran procession. During this stage, those hosting a celebration extend invitations to residents of the village by dispatching emissaries to visit the homes of prospective attendees individually. It is noteworthy that these invitations are often extended to individuals with familial ties to the hosts. This practice is commonly observed when the ritual is organized by a specific individual or family. However, in instances where Selakaran is held within a mosque setting, the Mesilaq stage involves the active participation of all mosque worshipers, facilitated through the use of loudspeakers.

The subsequent stage in the Selakaran procession is Selakar, which commences with the recitation of the Barzanji. During the pandemic, Selakaran ceremonies are typically conducted following prayers at the mosque or musholla. This scheduling is chosen to ensure maximum participation, as it coincides with a period when residents have the opportunity to gather. It's worth noting that, during the morning to evening hours, a significant portion of the population is engaged in agricultural activities in the fields.

The organizers of the Selakaran ceremony divided their roles into two categories. The first category involved individuals assigned the responsibility of narrating the extended story of Prophet Muhammad without any interruption from the other attendees. This reading task was entrusted to those members who possessed exceptional vocal abilities and demonstrated proficiency in the accurate pronunciation of the Makhraj (articulation points) of Hijaiyah letters.

The second category of responsibilities entailed the recitation of verses that extolled the virtues of Prophet Muhammad and his family. Once the recitation of these verses commenced, other participants in the procession would join in, echoing the same chants. Typically, the role of leading the recitation of these verses was bestowed upon an individual possessing the most melodious voice among the worshipers in attendance.

The recitation of these verses unfolds with all participants standing as soon as Bilal, the individual leading the recitation, initiates the chant. This collective standing continues until the conclusion of the verse. Within this process, several individuals distinguished by their loud and melodious vocal qualities emerge as prominent figures, their voices resonating dominantly throughout the recitation. It relect the notion of Islam as a drama (Alimi 2014) The duration of this verse typically spans a duration of thirty minutes to an hour, contingent upon the chosen rhythm employed during the recitation. This variability in duration arises from the flexibility inherent in the rhythmic patterns applied during the procession. Different rhythms are employed within the ceremony, encompassing both extended and abbreviated patterns, contributing to the variance in the time it takes to complete the recitation.

The final phase of the Selakaran ceremony entails "menggibung" or communal dining. This stage serves as the culminating act of the Selakaran activities, during which all participants are invited to partake in a shared meal. The food, typically comprising rice, topat, lepet, tumbek, nagasari, or other offerings, is presented on trays and is typically intended for consumption by two individuals per tray. The specific dishes served are contingent upon the resources and capabilities of the event's organizers, also known as the "shohibul hajat."

"Menggibung" serves as the concluding phase that signifies the culmination of the Selakaran ceremony. Following the consumption of the meal provided by the event organizers, the pilgrims depart from the event venue, each carrying a "berkat," or a blessing, as they return to their individual homes.

The "herding" phase of the Selakaran ceremony fosters intensive communication and interaction among the pilgrims. Frequently, this procession is punctuated with laughter, often stemming from the characteristic humor of the village community. The act of coming together also serves as a medium through which participants share the multifaceted complexities of their lives. This moment provides an opportunity for the exchange of information pertaining to various aspects such as work, health, children, and other pertinent matters.

2. The meaning of Selakaran for the Sasak Muslim community

The researchers conducted interviews with members of various communities who displayed active engagement in all activities, particularly during the pandemic. The selection of informants was predicated on three specific criteria: the level of involvement, the roles assumed in the court's activities, and the degree of robustness. These three criteria were meticulously considered to elucidate the underlying meanings and significance attributed by individuals who participate in the community's rituals.

Abdul Aziz, in his capacity as the Head of Kerujuk Hamlet, stated that he and the community leaders within the Kerujuk hamlet purposefully organized activities in response to the global pandemic. According to him, these efforts were undertaken as a proactive measure aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic and preventing the spread of the disease. He expressed the following:

"It is a tradition of our ancestors in the face of disasters of any kind. In the past our parents every time there was a disaster befall them in the form of earthquakes, landslides or bala' and disease, they always do the moral as a way to ask for help from God."

Conversely, the community also engaged in these activities with the expectation of receiving blessings and increased livelihood opportunities. The motivation behind this was the profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economic landscape of North Lombok Regency. Given that the region heavily relied on the tourism sector, which constituted nearly 70% of the Regional Native Income (PAD), the pandemic had severely disrupted economic activities and, thus, the residents hoped for divine assistance to alleviate their economic hardships.

For those individuals grappling with economic challenges resulting from the pandemic, these activities serve as a suitable platform not only to seek protection from the virus but also to beseech for increased sustenance and blessings in their daily lives. Among the Muslim community of North Lombok, a notion of "good rizki" is one that provides them with a sense of sufficiency without extravagance, as articulated by informant Paozul.

"The current economic conditions are very difficult because of the corona, especially our area relies on tourism. It feels like the impact is economically. Now everything is quiet, while the needs of our lives are increasing."

Selakaran also instills a sense of optimism within the pilgrims, as this ritual imbues the community with increased confidence in facing their daily lives. This newfound assurance stems from the inherent power embedded within the prayers offered during the procession, bolstering their faith and resilience. One of the informants stated:

"In between the contents of sholawat and do'a, every prayer will definitely be granted. Isn't that God's promise? So with many prayers through this field will surely be prayed by God including prayers begging for salvation from the plague."

D. Analysis

Communication can also serve as a vehicle for expression, effectively conveying one's feelings or emotions, particularly through verbal messages. In this context, communication is often termed "expressive communication" (Badj et al., n.d.). In the context of Selakaran, this ritual fosters diverse emotional connections among community members, enhancing the strength of their emotional bonds. It becomes particularly pivotal in fortifying these bonds during challenging times such as the pandemic. Selakaran concurrently cultivates a profound sense of community and order amidst the prevailing uncertainties of life in the pandemic era.

Hence, it can be asserted that despite the appearance of the Selakaran ritual seeming at odds with scientific health protocols, such as maintaining physical distance, from the perspective of ritual communication, this practice can function as a cohesive force within the community's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The emphasis on collectivity and communal spirit in the ritual becomes instrumental in addressing the pandemic collectively. Success or failure in managing the crisis hinges significantly on this collective spirit and the sense of togetherness, which fosters mutual assistance and collective care among community members.

Rituals represent a form of symbolic communication that endures across generations, often passed down from one generation to the next. This practice includes temple rituals, which have persisted for an extended period, particularly in conjunction with community celebrations, such as preparations for Hajj and various other festive occasions. In the context of the Selakaran ritual, numerous symbols are present, each carrying distinct meanings and messages. These messages may be conveyed through readings, movements, intonations, or gestures, all of which are comprehended and interpreted by the participating members, underscoring the ritual's rich and nuanced symbolic language.

The act of conveying messages within a ritual is typically regarded as a sacred undertaking by those involved. Consequently, participants in a ritual procession are expected to demonstrate reverence, recognizing the sacred nature of the process. Within this framework, Selakaran rituals encompass a form of ritual communication regarded as a transcendent form of expression by the Muslim community of North Lombok Regency. Selakaran is perceived as a conduit for conveying supplications to the Creator, Allah SWT. As a result, these rituals place a strong emphasis on expressive activities, encompassing not only explicit verbal messages but also non-verbal messages that engage the emotions of the participants, all with the purpose of connecting with the divine.

Rituals, including temple rituals, are cultural constructs with deep cultural significance. The Selakaran ritual, specific to the people of North Lombok Regency, holds distinct cultural and symbolic meanings, evident in its non-conventional execution. The timing of its implementation is meticulously chosen, taking into account both the opportune moments and the intentions of the event organizer, known as the "shohibul hajat." This careful consideration reflects the ritual's cultural importance and the reverence with which it is observed.

Indeed, rituals can be viewed as cultural products that are subject to scholarly investigation. Researchers, employing an ethnographic approach, seek to unveil the intricate communication expressions exhibited by the Muslim community of North Lombok Regency. The method of conveying messages within this ritual can be discerned through the utilization of communication mediums, such as messengers, which function as vehicles reflecting the collective beliefs and values held by the North Lombok Muslim community. Through this ethnographic exploration, the profound cultural significance and communication intricacies embedded within the ritual can be elucidated and analyzed.

The verses recited during this ritual serve as a distinctive medium for conveying messages. Through the prayers uttered in the ritual, a collective sense of optimism is fostered among the worshippers, offering solace during the challenging times of the pandemic. It is this profound significance and the sense of sacredness associated with the ritual that elevate it beyond mere routine practice. Consequently, the Selakaran ritual is conducted on specific occasions, underscoring its sacred nature and the belief in its transformative power, rather than being a commonplace, everyday occurrence. Optimism arises from the emotional bonds forged among individuals. These bonds, in turn, engender a sense of mutual concern, as the entire community engaged in the process recognizes their shared destiny, giving rise to a collective awareness of facing these challenging times together. The communal meal at the conclusion of the event symbolizes the pinnacle of togetherness and a positive conclusion to the various phases of people's lives. This moment can also be interpreted as savoring the fruits of their efforts, signifying the conclusion of the ritual. In the context of the pandemic, this procession represents a period during which the community collectively navigates the challenges posed by the pandemic, subsequently entering a phase of adapting to new habits and the "new normal."

Rituals also play a pivotal role in providing comfort and a sense of predictability. Through rituals, communities find hope and reassurance, believing that they can navigate challenging times, bolstered by the prayers offered during the processions. The Muslim community of North Lombok Regency holds the conviction that every prayer will be heard and accepted by Allah SWT, which fosters collective consciousness and a strong sense of togetherness. This belief system enhances neighborly concern and mutual support among community members.

E. Conclusion

The Selakaran ritual, conducted by the Muslim community of North Lombok Regency through its three distinct stages—mesilaq, selakar, and soaring—may initially appear to contradict the recommended government health protocols, such as mask-wearing and physical distancing. However, this ritual carries profound significance for the Sasak Muslim community, especially during the pandemic. It is viewed as a source of reinforcement, providing social and emotional fortitude to the participants. This emotional bond becomes the cornerstone for resilience during trying times, including economic hardships, restricted accessibility, and social inequalities endured during the implementation of Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM). Furthermore, Selakaran offers a sense of comfort and predictability, instilling hope in the community that they can weather these challenging times, as the prayers uttered during the procession inspire optimism and confidence in their ability to overcome adversity.

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