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## **AN ETHNO SEMANTIC OBSERVATION OF NAMES: A CASE STUDY ON MAO NAGA PERSONAL NAMES**

This paper attempts a study on Mao Naga personal names\*\*. It is hypothesized that unlike many other naming systems, the Mao Naga community has a distinctive way of giving personal names. Thus, it would be interesting to examine the motivation and aspiration in choosing a particular name for a child. The paper investigates into the semantic constituent of personal names. It is found that a name in this community follows two important criterias of the socio-linguistic world that is the name should be meaningful and it should reveal the worldview of the community. A comparative study of the past and the present naming system reveals the permeation of traditional system to the present generation.

### **Introduction of the people**

The exonym 'Mao' refers to a Naga tribe of Manipur. The endonyms: *Memei*, *Mela* and *Eme chijü* refer to its people, language and land respectively. Geographically, it is situated at the northern part of Senapati district, bordering Nagaland. Racially, Mao Naga belongs to Mongoloid group. Linguistically, the language falls under the Angami-Pochuri group of the Tibeto-Burman language family (Burlin 2003).

In the earlier times, people were engaged mainly in agricultural activities with livestock rearing being the second most important occupation. Rice, being a staple food and rice-beer a principal drink; people developed an "exquisite craftsmanship of converting the hilly terrains into delicately beautiful and continuous terraces covering ranges for the purpose of wet *terrace and dry terrace* (addition) cultivation" (Heshu 2008:23-24). As such, seasons and the name of months are based purely on agricultural activities. Agriculture also served as a pivotal point around which festivals and most rituals revolved.

Mao religion could best be described as animistic. Amongst other deities, they believe in a Supreme Being who is the creator of the sky and the earth - the God of all gods (deities). He is the provider, sustainer and also the protector. At the same time, he brings death and destruction if the populace

fails to act according to his decree. However, such retributions can be averted through good conduct and also a wrong-doing can be appeased through offering of sacrifices.

Socially, people live on egalitarian philosophy. A rich man's wealth is occasionally distributed amongst his clansmen and villagers by giving feast known as the feast of merit<sup>1</sup>. For such act of kindness, a man and his wife are honoured in the community.

### **Methodology**

The data used in the present analysis is collected directly from the field. The informants are elderly Mao Naga speakers who are considered as the repository of traditional practices. The informants are directly interviewed. The main informants for the present input were Mr N. Salew (Makhreime) and Mr Kashiprü Besü (Chakremei) who are both in their 90's.

### ***Personal names***

A personal name is an external badge of identity; so is, nationality, religion, and race which are all outside the ontology of an individual<sup>2</sup>. Yet, this badge of identity has been treated as deeply rooted in the being itself. Name, once given to an individuals becomes intrinsically interwoven with the person and ultimately evolve to become a part and parcel of that person. Reiterating on this assertion, Moraru while describing the Albanians' suppression and seizure of identity markers such as IDs, driver's licenses, license plates etc. by the Serbian troops states that 'when your driver's license goes, so goes your identity'. He further elaborates 'The name has become its own, living referent, flesh and blood, body... primarily the ethnicity of the named and subsequently the right to live in Kosovo, their homeland' (2000: 50). The name, a referent, thus becomes an inseparable part of an individual's sense of identity: the individual itself.

A personal name in many other societies has cultural significance. To some, it may be a chronology of important events, to others it may just be the fads of the parent to let their child bear the name of famous and important persons for still others, it may serve as a representation of clanship or genealogical lineage. Some tribal communities of North East India, such as the Nagas and the Kuki-Chin groups, usually link personal names to socio-cultural realities. The Kuki-Chin group<sup>3</sup> for instance normally selects the last syllable of either their maternal or their paternal grandparent, then suffix a syllable to derive a meaningful name. Only in rare occasion, such juxtaposition of two or more syllables results in difficulties of establishing a meaningful word in the language. Their names thus carry meanings, unlike the Mandes (Garos<sup>4</sup>) most of whose 'names are meaningless' (Hvenekilde, Marak, and Burling: 2000:87), and surprisingly even avoid using lexical items that are

meaningful in the language. A name in this community has more to do with the selection of a unique, and at the same time, rhythmic sounds<sup>5</sup>.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Names in Mao can range from highly significant cultural concept to aspiration of the parents for their child in relation to wealth, offspring, virtue, etc. It can at times be an indication of the season of birth or a special occasion coinciding with the pregnancy and parturition. At other occasion, it can be an indication of tragedy or misfortune, such as a death in the family or dear ones. Still, in other cases, it may just indicate the position of the child in relationship to the elder one when there is a successive birth of the same sex, or it may even be a description of a distinctive feature of the newborn. We will look into the different motivations below.

#### ***Personal names based on agricultural practices***

Names of a newborn in Mao Naga community can be chosen from the season or month of parturition<sup>6</sup>. Being an agrarian society, practising jhum (slash-and-burn cultivation) as well as a terrace and wet cultivation (swidden cultivation); and paddy being the staple food, seasons for carrying out different stages of agricultural activities become an inspiration for a personal name. Table 1 lists few names that directly or indirectly imply agricultural activities. The list includes names of both genders where a female name is marked (FN) and a male name is indicated with (MN). As observed from table 1, a number of names directly bear the meaning related to transplantation season. Further, the season of intense preparation for transplantation falls within the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> months of the Mao lunar calendar. Also, the 11<sup>th</sup> month is a time for paddy harvesting and its related rituals. Names under this category signify the magnitude of importance of agriculture in this community. It is worth mentioning here that in spite of community's engagement in different agricultural practices such as growing of cereals (apart from rice), vegetables, fruits, etc, only activities pertaining to paddy (rice) surfaces in personal names.

#### ***Names based on festivals***

Mao Naga festivals are events that showcase religious practices; display culturally relevant activities and festivities and depending on the particular festival it incorporates themes such as thanksgiving or supplication from the almighty for a good future. These festivals are considered as an important part of the socio-cultural milieu of the community. Thus, the relevance of feast as a cultural event is indicated in names such as Lidzusa, Nilia, Nisa, Onia, (all FN) and Nili (MN). Lidzusa is a name derived from *lidzü*, a ritual of divine libation offered by every household during festivals. Other names with the root word *ni* (from *oni* 'feast') indicate birth of the child during the festive season. Ozhou (MN) and Ozha (FN) are names given to boys and girls respectively when they are born during *ozho koso* 'feast of merit'. Another

interpretation is that the two names (Ozhou and Ozha) are derived from ozhe ‘rice beer’ and thus symbolizes festival. This is because rice beer plays a vital role in any feast and the community indulges in the practice of offering this beverage lavishly to every guest during any such social occasion.

### ***Personal names based on wealth***

Parents’ aspiration for the well-being of their child is a universal phenomenon. One of the desires of the Mao parents is for their child to be wealthy. Wealth in this community is sought so that one could perform the different stages of feast of merits ‘*Ozho koso*’. As mentioned earlier, feast of merit is a ceremony to climb the social ladder. Wealth, in the bygone days, consisted mainly of paddy and cattle; and feast was held to lavish rice beer, rice and meat. The significance of wealth thus penetrates into the naming system. For instance, Chamaikho (MN) which is a combination of *ocha* ‘wealth in the form of cereals’, *omai* ‘people’, and *kho* ‘to ask’. In Chamailo (MN), the above interpretation continues along with the suffix *lo* from *elo* meaning ‘welcome’ indicating the newborn baby would bring abundant wealth to the family. Tokho (MN) and Takha<sup>7</sup> (FN) which are derived from *oto* ‘food’ and *kho* ‘to ask’ is also an indication of wealth. Chape (MN) is a shortened form of *ochatope* (*ocha* ‘wealth in the form of cereals’; *tope* ‘last for a longer period of time’<sup>8</sup>).

### ***Personal names based on population***

Another aspiration of parents is for a child to be endowed with abundant offspring. The importance of strength and the size of the population were a necessity in headhunting<sup>9</sup> cultures such as Mao because, like any other warring culture, it was might that ruled. The desire of the parent for population is shown in names such as Pfohreni, Pfohrenrû, and Pfohrenlo (all MN). These names are derived from the phrase *pfukre pfuzho* ‘large family’ but large family here entails a large family of male members. Likewise, in names like Nipuni, Hrupuni, Nikheni (all MN), the wish that more male members be born to the family is reflected. Names in this category denote the passionate and intense craving of parents in choosing the sex of the child. Though the degree of yearning for a male child could be more, this does not reflect that a female child is despised in this community. This claim can be substantiated by names like Athini, Athiphro, Athia, Athisa, Kholia, and Roni (all FN) where the root word is derived from *athe* ‘crazy’, signifying a deep desire of the parents. Kholia is from *kokho* ‘implore’ while Roni is derived from *koro* ‘intent’. The fact that names of male child are comparatively more in this category could be attributed to the patriarchal system of the community.

### ***Personal names based on sequential bearing of the same sex***

The group given below indicates the sequential bearing of a child of the same sex. Ashouni, Adaphro, Ashiphro, etc. are names of a girl child that

indicate the immediate elder one is also a girl child. Similarly, Hrûsho, Ashihrû, Adani, Adazûo, Ashikho, etc. are for the male child. These names are derived from *asho* 'continuous' and *ada* 'immediacy'. Such names are usually (not exclusively) found in big families of eight to ten siblings. Therefore, these names gave an implicit indication that the family has good fortune concerning sibling. In some cultures such as Meitei, specific names are used to earmark as the position of a child. For instance, *Ibohal* (ibo < ibungngo 'a reference or address term for male' and hal 'first'); *Iboyaima* (yaima 'middle one') and *Iboton* (ton 'last') are given to the first, second and third/last boy child, whereas the female names are *Ibemhal*, *Ibeyaima* and *Ibetombi* (ibe < ibema 'address term for female'). However, in the case of Mao, only two names *Nokhuo* (MN) and *Nokhua* (FN) (nokhu < last) indicates positional names of the last sibling of the family.

### ***Personal names base on the physical characteristics***

It is true that some children are born with different physical characteristics distinct from that of average children. The different physical characteristic here refers to the size of a child. Katia, Kateni, (FN) etc. derive from the root word *ttie* 'small'. Likewise, Chokhoni (FN) (chokho>feeble) is a name given to someone who is not only unhealthy but small and sickly at the time of birth. Kajüni (FN) and Kajükho (MN) with the root word *kajü* 'big' on the other hand are named who is born very healthy. It may be noted that there are no names to indicate smallness in size of a male child. This is because, among the warriors, it is ominous to possess a name that undermines one's size or strength. Contrary to this inauspicious omen of undermining size and strength through names is the connotation of callousness and apathy as a motive of the name. Names like Komou (MN) and Komuni (FN) would imply the child to be sluggish. In addition, Koheni (MN) would depict dithery character and disarray in one's mental capability. However, this does not entail parents wishing for insanity or dullness of the child but the hidden meaning here is that the child should be innocent and obedient. Logical deduction to this claim could be affirmed through agricultural practice. In an agrarian community, an unruly or a constantly wailing child is a hindrance to the high demand of physical labour in the field. However, if the literal explanation is taken to be true, it can be conjectured that these names are linked to the previously discussed category of negative connotation in order to divert the attention of the spirits.

### ***Personal names based on belief system***

#### ***(a) Personal names based on negative connotation***

The death of the child (or for that matter even an elderly) is generally attributed to the belief that the young and tender spirit of a child had fallen prey to its predator i.e., the malevolent spirit. This belief calls for a means to

subtly divert the attention of the spirit (god) of death. The name under this class is given with an intention of arousing a nauseating and unsoliciting feeling to the spirit of death. Names based on the above philosophy of life are Akha-a, Sokha-a (FN), Akha and Hrukha (MN). The negative connotations of the given names with the root word *kha* 'bitter' is significant when taken in context with the burial ceremony in which leaves of *kokiwu* '*Solanum spirale*' (which is considered as the most bitter vegetable) is torn into two-halves to signify an end of relationship between the living and the dead. A more rigorous means adopted by the community is to name a child with obnoxiously disgusting or revolting features. Names like Obo-o (MN) and Boni (FN) where 'o' and 'ni' here marks masculine and feminine gender respectively has a derivation from the root word *obo* 'faeces'. Similarly, Vobo 'pig's excrement', Shibo 'dog's excrement' and Sobo (all MN) 'animal's excrement' are all given to divert the attention of the malevolent spirit. Black (1996) has noticed a similar practice in the Turner's study on Kaiama of Nigeria reporting the existence of a custom whereby parents who have lost several children would treat the next child with feigned disdain giving him/her a name of contempt, such as dunghill, or slave, or even no name at all. The reason behind this is to cheat the death-spirit. By pretending the child is unwanted and unloved, it is hoped the death-spirit will not waste time taking such a child. The corresponding system of naming between the Mao Naga and the Kaiama of Nigeria could reveal more than coincidence. A similar philosophy such as this could have risen from analogous ways of living and beliefs.

### ***Personal names based on positive connotation***

Contrary to practice mentioned above, traditional beliefs also uphold that one cannot name a child with an aura of gorgeousness, beauty, charm or other similar desirable calibers. These qualities are conjectured to be captivating to the malevolent spirit. Therefore, it is with the greatest caution that a child, especially the firstborn, is named, to avoid any such attraction. However, if the first one survives, names such as Kaikhra, Kaini (both FN), Kaisü, Kaikho (MN), with the root word *kazhü* 'good' an indication of good life, are given to the younger ones. The belief associated with this practice is that the spirits of the siblings together would be able to ward off the malevolent spirit. Thus, in this community, one can see only the younger siblings bearing names of famous personalities, grand and great grandfathers or grandmothers. It may be noted that some of the names of grandparents like Peli, Akajü, Alemo, Arüjü, Aruo, Krüpe, Mattali, Shikache (all MN) are no longer semantically transparent to the present generation. Many of their stories are greatly admired even today, yet their meanings cannot be reconstructed. However, these names are still given in order to maintain family lineage; as remembrances and to show respect and appreciation to the qualities of the grandparents.

### ***Personal names based on tragedy***

A stroke of ill fortune or tragedy of the family stands as a token of representation in a personal name, marking the event. Misfortune or tragedy that makes its mark in personal name usually characterizes the loss of a family member, particularly parent(s). Thus, a child is named Manga-a (FN), or Mangaili, or Mangu-u (both MN), with the root word *mangai* 'to regret'. Likewise, names like Modo (MN) and Modoa (FN) from the root word *modo* 'lament' are names that tell the tale of tribulation in the family. These names generally point to the tragedy that had befallen either parents during pregnancy and parturition. In the case of loss of elder sibling(s), parents would come up with names imploring the gods/spirits to spare the child. In Themoshö (MN), 'the' is deduced from *kathe* 'to die', *mosho* meaning 'left over'. Kashiprû and Katheprû (both MN), from root words *kashi* 'bad', *kathe* 'to die' and *prû* 'afraid/scare/fear', are names imploring that nothing bad like death should happen to them as they are afraid/scared of it. Similarly, *Makabo* (MN) means 'not to loss/die but survive'. This pattern is also found in the naming system of Meitei/Manipuri of Manipur<sup>10</sup>. Manipuri names like *Manggi* and *Manglem*, a compound word of mang 'graveyard/crematory' with *ki* 'fear' and *lem* 'left out' to form the meaning fear and left out by the graveyard/crematory respectively.

### ***Personal names based on present culture***

Work in historical linguistics demonstrates that language continuously changes their meaning and inferences. At the same time, anthropological studies also demonstrate that cultural behavior of a particular community changes with time. Therefore, this dynamic property of both language and culture, caters and serves as an adaptive resource to accommodate the changes. Such change is witnessed to penetrate in the naming system of the Mao Naga society. Also, with the increasing number of namesakes due to a relatively small corpus, two new trends have emerge. First is the usage of nicknames and pet name. Nicknames are encoded from varied topics. Such names usually originate from among the peer group who exaggerate action, thought or opinion of an individual and thus humorously tagg the individual. Whereas, a pet name is usually a contracted form of a given name (any syllable) prefixed with genitive marker 'a', for instance, *alo* for Loli, *ani* for Nisa, *akho* for Kholi, etc. Pet names are given by near and dear ones to mark their endearment toward the child. Second and more productive trend is coinage of new names. Under this category, names such as Isü 'local name of Mt. Tenepu', *Shihrani* from shihra 'blessing', *Kraloni* from *krakolo* 'thankfulness' *Mavani* from *mava* 'to let shine', etc. are given to connote strong or masculine qualities for male and dainty or feminine qualities for female. While the coined names are as meaningful as the old ones, yet there is a marked tendency to name a child with qualities or virtues that are considered more appropriate with the present day situation. For instance, Chisüzöhüo, Chisükho (chisû > wisdom; zhü > good;

kho > ask); Rakouzhüo, (rakou > luck; zhü > good = lucky person), Raphrozhüo (ora > god; phro > bestowal/selection; zhü > good = a good gift of god), Okrezhüo (okre > amicable = an ambassador for good relationship), Amaniro (amani > peaceful; ro > feminine marker = an ambassador of peace). From these given names we can see that intellectual capacity of the child is called for, as education has taken a hold over the agricultural and warring scenario of the past. In addition, a glimpse of trouble predicament due to militancy and intermittent ethnic feud are been reflected in names. An inclination of the parents to be at par with the outside world and a desire to live a harmonious life are the themes chosen here. As Christianity has swept over the traditional practices and beliefs, biblical names and Christianity related names too have surfaced as the first name. Purity, beauty, and the name of flowers are some of the qualities avoided as personal names in this community up till today. The Sacred vocabulary of the clan or inference from religious practices or spirit(s) or god(s) (Bhaskararao 2006:121), are not found in Mao personal name.

### Conclusion

As a in the traditional practice, Mao Nagas have a strong belief system where a continuous struggle exists between the malevolent spirit and man, to possess a newborn. To this effect, it becomes obligatory that someone must claim a child soon after parturition by proclaiming *azhe sole* 'it will be mine'. If the spirit assert before the man, it is believed that the child will die. Another socio-cultural norm widely practiced is the expression '*ozhu pfüpeihrotie /ozhu jûlotie*', literally meaning 'the name is too big/great for the child to bear/carry'. If such is the case, it is believe that the child will contract different illnesses. The remedy to this is to change the name of the child. Names having the hallmark of supernatural being or even name of individuals of distinct calibre accomplishing different feats are considered to cause it. This practice is also reported among the Chothes<sup>11</sup> of Manipur. Another common practice in olden days was when an infant would die before being named. In such cases, the infant is tabooed to be buried in the open space with a belief that he/she is not recognized as human. Thus, he/she is buried within the enclosure of the roof of the house. The belief points to the claim that a name is given not only as a surface marker of identity but as an attribute that links the external form, which consists of a sequence of phonemes or graphemes, with the internal content which is a set of semantic features (Pamp: 1985).

Naming a child in Mao community is never an arbitrary affair. A particular name is chosen over other names for various reasons. These reasons may include indications of the significance of the past, the present and the future. The names are not only meaningful and analyzable but also depict the traditional and cultural aspect of the community. Though some names are difficult to explain because the vocabularies used in the olden days are no longer semantically transparent to the younger generation, every name is

curved out with a specific cultural significance and a deep meaning beneath it. Therefore, names in this culture are not arbitrarily chosen to identify one from the other, but they are meaningful, substantive and significant which the people of this culture hold dear to their hearts. Thus, socio-linguistic significance and semantic implication forms a basis for derivation of a marker of identification and identity. It is, as Bean (1980: 311) rightly points out, 'a part of, or identical with, the soul, self, or personality of its bearer'. The study of personal names brings out a partial understanding of the worldview of the community. One can proudly claim that even though the influence of Christianity has swept over the community yet the deep seeded tradition still remains alive in the hearts of the people.

#### NOTES

- \* The paper is an extract from my unpublished thesis pp. 57-74
- \*\* More Mao Naga personal names are provided in the appendix in no particular order.
- 1. A feast of merit is a feast given by a person when he comes into wealth. It is also a means to climb the ladder of social distinction. There are different stages of feast of merit. A person in his life time can perform 7 stages of feast of merit with the subsequent feast being more honourable than the previous.
- 2. This insight is due to P.P. Giridhar in personal communication.
- 3. Personal communication with Pauthang Haokip, a Thadou Kuki speaker.
- 4. A Tibeto-Burman speaking group in Meghalaya, India.
- 5. Personal communication with Dolme Momin, a Garo speaker.
- 6. This is also a way to tell the year of a child as parents usually do not keep birth records.
- 7. Derived from Tokho-a; here '-a' is a feminine marker.
- 8. There exists a concept in Mao that acquired wealth can be easily exhaust for some, while for others who are destined to be rich, it would take a much longer time to get exhausted.
- 9. Women do not go for headhunting per se but there are narrations which tell the tale of woman bringing hunted heads.
- 10. This and other Meiteilon/Manipuri data are from a personal communication with Surmangol Sharma, a Manipuri speaker.
- 11. An indigenous tribe of Manipur belonging to Mongoloid race and speak Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Naga groups. This incite is from Yuhlung C. Charles in personal communication.

**Table 1**  
**Name based on seasons relating to agricultural activities.**

Personal Name	Derivation	Closest Meaning
Saleo (MN)	Sale	name of the 7 <sup>th</sup> month
Kapeo (MN) Kapesa (FN)	kape	transplantation season
Besa (FN) Besü (MN)	Belu	11 <sup>th</sup> month of the lunar calendar
Chisa (FN)	oche	harvesting season
Chopfoza (FN) Chopfokho (MN)	Pfuzû	6 <sup>th</sup> month of the Mao lunar calendar
Dosüsa (FN)	doshou	transplantation

**Table 2**  
**Name based on festivals**

Personal Name	Derivation	Closest Meaning
Lidzüsa (FN)	lidzü	divine libation
Nisa (FN)	oni	festival
Ozhou (MN), Ozha (FN)	ozho koso	feast of merit

**Table 3**  
**Name based on wealth**

Personal Name	Derivation	Closest Meaning
Chania (FN)	ocha kani	wealthy (paddy)
Lonio (MN)	olu kani	wealthy (property)
Ninio (MN) or Ninia (FN)	oni kani	wealthy (paddy and cattle)

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## APPENDIX

Personal Name	Derivation	Closest Meaning
Adahrü	ada	adjacent
Adakho	-do-	-do-
Adaso	-do-	-do-
Adazhüa (FN)	-do-	-do-
Asha-a (FN)	ashou	continuity
Ashiho	-do-	-do-
Ashuli	-do-	-do-
Hesha-a (FN)	-do-	-do-
Kosha-a (FN)	-do-	-do-
Koshoni (FN)	-do-	-do-
Shuli	-do-	-do-
Akhazhu	kakha	bitter
Athehe	athe	crave
Athehrü	-do-	-do-
Atheni (FN)	-do-	-do-
Athia (FN)	-do-	-do-
Athikho	-do-	-do-
Athisa (FN)	-do-	-do-
Athishu	-do-	-do-
Athisü	-do-	-do-
Chopfuhra (FN)	chopfo	man
Chani (FN)	ocha	wealth (paddy)
Charani (FN)	chara	extraordinary
Choro	-do-	-do-
Daikho	edei	entreat
Daili	-do-	-do-
Edehrü	-do-	-do-
Doshuni (FN)	odo koshou	transplantation (paddy)
Ela-a (FN)	elo	welcome
Eloni (FN)	-do-	-do-
Elo-o (FN)	-do-	-do-
Lohrü	-do-	-do-
Lokho	-do-	-do-
Loli	-do-	-do-
Lolia (FN)	-do-	-do-
Lophro (FN)	-do-	-do-
Losa (FN)	-do-	-do-
Loshuo	-do-	-do-

Losü	-do-	-do-
Hekhini	hrükani	desire to live
Heni	-do-	-do-
Henia (FN)	-do-	-do-
Hrüzüa (FN)	hrükozü	worth living
Hrüzüni (FN)	-do-	-do-
Eshu-u	kazhü	good
Eshia (FN)	-do-	-do-
Kaihrü	-do-	-do-
Kaisü	-do-	-do-
Kashisü	kashi	bad
Kaprea (FN)	kaprü	fear
Kholia (FN)	kho	ask
Nelia (FN)	kani	recieved
Niloni	-do-	-do-
Puni	nipukani	wanting more
Roli	ro	intend
Roni (FN)	-do-	-do-
Runio	oru kazhü	good at war
Sani	sakani	wanting to care
Sanu	-do-	-do-
Saza (FN)	-do-	-do-
Zhinia (FN)	ozhe kani	abundant rice beer
Zhunio	-do-	-do-

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