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## Unravelling the Truth and Demystifying the Malay Civilisation: Reading *Sulalatus Salatin* with New Historicism

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### Abstract

Historicism, history, and literature are intertwined. However, some scholars believe that Malay historiographical texts are ahistorical texts. This study focuses on the historical aspects found in the *Sulalatus Salatin* manuscript. The objective of this study is to identify the historical aspects of *Sulalatus Salatin* and prove the extent of the truth of those historical aspects. To achieve this objective, the methods used are archival analysis, textual analysis and content analysis. The results show that *Sulalatus Salatin* is a manuscript that is recognized as a text in the form of history. This study uses the theory of New Historicism introduced by (Greenblatt, 2005; Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000) in analysing the historical texts. The study concludes that the aspects of historiography found in Malay historiographical texts contain historical truths.

**Keywords:** New Historicism, Literary Theory, Malaysian Literature, Comparative Literature, *Sulalatus Salatin*

## Introduction

History is a memory and a heap of human experience (Khoo, 1991). Khoo explained that history is a representation of truth within the spectrum of relativism. Similarly, (Muhammad, 1992) states that the aspect of historiography is one of the hotly debated critical issues. This is because there is a disagreement about the Malay historiographical manuscripts that are also perceived as historical texts.

Some scholars think that the Malay historiographical manuscript of *Sulalatus Salatin* does not warrant itself as a historical text while other scholars believe that it is an actual historical text. On the one hand, for the Malay community, *Sulalatus Salatin* is considered by the community as a masterpiece because it has various aspects that symbolize the civilization of the Malay community such as politics, economy, and culture. On the other hand, many scholars do not recognize this work as a historical text. This is apparent when (Muhammad, 1992) synthesises the ideas of (Roolvink, 1967), who says that:

*“This question is very close to Malay historiography, in general, it can be said that history books in Classical Malay literature consist of two parts: The first part is mythical-legendary only, which tells the situation in the past, about the beginning of customs and so on; and the second part, which is less mythical-legendary, but more historical in nature, is more in keeping with historical facts, especially if the author is telling about his own time.”*

(Roolvink, 1967) believes that a work that has a historical pattern is often associated with mythical-legendary or non-historical and historical elements. This has led to the overlap and interrelationship of the two elements. This has sparked controversy and debate about it. (Hussain, 2011) argues that this Malay historiographical manuscript, although not recognized by some scholars, there are some scholars who believe that the manuscript is historical in nature. Roslina (2017) argues that the story of the legendary gods in Malay History is actually based on real stories.

(Hussain, 2011) explains that the historical value in the text of *Sulalatus Salatin* and its contents are mainly in the form of fairy tales and legends. This can be seen when Hussain explained that although there are many aspects of the text of Malay History which are unable to provide convincing historical evidence due to the presence of unusual elements and the arrangement is not systematic as a historical essay. However, they explained that this manuscript is very useful as a source of research, especially in studies involving politics, government and the social life of the Malacca Malay community. In fact, (Haskell, 2020) has critically analysed the interconnectedness between contemporary Malacca and literary texts.

## Literature Review

As stated through preliminary research on the aspects of historiography in the *Sulalatus Salatin* manuscript, the researcher found that the study of this Malay historiographical manuscript has been done by many researchers either from within or outside the country. Most of the research is to find out the extent of the truth of historiography in the two manuscripts. First, (Noor, 1972) focused on the historiography found in Malay History and examines the opinions of western scholars who do not acknowledge and recognize this manuscript of Malay historiography by presenting patterns in Malay History. In addition, (Lufti, 2003) focused his study on three opinions among literary researchers in the archipelago on literary works, one of which is on Malay History. With regard to Malay History, he took the

Western orientalist opinion that this work is historical literature in nature. (Noazimah, 2013) discussed the myths, legends and fairy tales with a variety of functions that are specific in Malay History that has a link with Malay culture. Next, Hasyim (2008); Hasyim (2008) focused on history and neo-nostalgia that is by relating to literature a production of collective morality related to historical traditions.

(Zubir, 2011) has discussed ethnocentrism in the traditional Malay historiographical text of *Sulalatus Salatin*. Based on his research, ethnocentrism means signs of the early resistance of indigenous peoples to colonialism before colonial times. Tatiana (2012) who focuses on the concept of prosperity found in Malay Islamic Historiography. His study found that, Malay texts contain a lot of information about the status and condition of the Malay community in the 13th to 19th century. Hence, this study has two objectives as follows:

☐ identify historical aspects in *Sulalatus Salatin*

☐ proves the extent of the truth of the historical aspect in *Sulalatus Salatin*

This study uses the theory of New Historicism introduced by (Greenblatt, 2005) Stephen in 1982. The Theory of New Historicism emphasizes on the reconstruction of history and offers ideas about historical concepts and offers ideas about current historical concepts (Barry, 2017). This means that this theory places more emphasis on historical aspects and texts. This theory was also supported by his friends Louis Montrose, Jonathan Goldberg and Jerome McGann.

According to (Sohaimi, 2003), through New Historicism, the author no longer re-records the past or in other words the past but focuses on his purpose to reconstruct the past. In other words, the author no longer records history but reconstructs history (Tyson, 2014). This is further explained by the opinion taken from Hamilton (2003); Veesser (1993) who explained that history in the theory of New Historicism is a new dimension that is deconstructive that is to review the relationship between the text and the cultural system the text was born because culture influences the production of a text. The principle of New Historicism is also that history has ideological implications. This can be seen through the opinion put forward by (Sohaimi, 2003) who explains that New Historicism believes that history has ideological implications. Practitioners of New Historicism acknowledge that the existence of a cultural "episteme" that is culture contains various perspectives and ways that can explain the historical reality recorded in a cultural text (Payne, 2005). This can be seen based on the opinion of (Sohaimi, 2003) who explained that the voices of society or from a deeper angle of conflicts and problems that occur in a society they express it through literary texts all the dissatisfaction they feel such as thoughts, tones and attitude. A literary text also records cultural exchange. In this context, it is clear to show that literary texts act to control cultural constraints in a society. Therefore, he also explained that Greenblatt believed that in a historical writing there is no difference with the formation of culture because history and culture have a very close link because without culture it is impossible for history to exist and vice versa.

### **Analysis**

The historical aspect in *Sulalatus Salatin* is the main thing that will be discussed in this study. This is because, history is an element that cannot be separated from the works in the form of Malay historiography. This can be further strengthened by the theory of New Historicism put forward by (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000) to further strengthen the truth about the aspects

of historiography found in this manuscript. Based on *Sulalatus Salatin* there are several aspects of historiography that will be studied in depth and thoroughly by researchers. Aspects of history that will be studied are the production and writing of the text *Sulalatus Salatin*, the truth of time and date as evidence of events really happened, the origin of the lineage of kings and places, the arrival of Islam and its spread and the Fall of the Kingdom of Melaka and Pasai. Earning and writing manuscripts is one of the most important aspects of history. This clearly shows that a work that can be said to be a work of history is a manuscript with the author's name. This is because, the existence of the author will determine whether the work is historical or purely fictional.

The *Sulalatus Salatin* manuscript is a Malay historiographical manuscript written by Tun Seri Lanang. Based on the *Sulalatus Salatin* manuscript, Tun Seri Lanang was a Treasurer in the palace who was assigned to compose and write this manuscript. Later, he told about himself as an author. This study uses the copy of *Sulalatus Salatin* edition of (Said, 2003). This manuscript shows the author telling about its origins. So, it clearly shows that this manuscript was indeed written by Tun Seri Lanang. This can be seen in the passage below:

*"After the fakir heard that, so the members of the fakir allazi mukkarabun 'ala jahlihi, Tun Muhamad his name, Tun Sri Lanang his henchmen, Paduka Raja his title, Bendahara, son of the rich Paduka Raja, grandson of Bendahara Seri Maharaja, son of Seri Nara Diraja Tun Ali, his son Mani Puridan qaddasa I-lahu sirrahum ;. Malays, from Bukit Si Guntang Maha Miru; malakat; the state of Batu Sawar Darul Salam."*

Tun Seri Lanang's real name is Tun Muhamad and Tun Seri Lanang is his nickname. Apart from that, he is also called Paduka Raja, Bendahara, son of the rich Paduka Raja, grandson of Bendahara Seri Mahajara, son of Seri Nara Diraja Tun Ali and son of Mani Purindam. However, the thing to be proud of is that the race that wrote this manuscript was also noted as the Malay race. This clearly shows that the introduction to the author in this manuscript is very important and taken seriously. Said (2003) that is, he thinks that this copy of *Sulalatus Salatin* was written by Tun Sri Lanang, that is, his original name was Tun Muhamad. In fact, Tun Seri Lanang wrote this manuscript because of the responsibility that the king ordered him to produce. Therefore, due to his sense of responsibility to produce the manuscript, he produced the *Sulalatus Salatin* by stating not only his name but the origins of his ancestors as well as his race.

The discussion on the original author of *Sulalatus Salatin*, namely Tun Seri Lanang, can be taken through the opinion that has been explained by Mana Sikana who explained that the original author is Tun Seri Lanang. This can be seen through the opinion of (Mana, 2007) which shows the assertion that the original author was Tun Seri Lanang, although there is a dispute from Winsteadt but the evidence presented by him is very weak when compared to the opinion of Shellabear which presents historical evidence clearly. Furthermore, if Winsteadt's opinion is examined in depth, the explanations and proofs he presents are constantly changing and not fixed. This has led to confusion with Winsteadt's opinion. Therefore, Shellabear has rejected the winsteadt's opinion by asserting that the original author was Tun Seri Lanang.

This truth can be further strengthened by the opinions of several figures who prove the existence of the author. One of them is the opinion put forward by (Hawa, 1994) who explains that the element of objective truth is the author's choice because it is based on thoughtful

evidence. However, to show the perfection of the manuscript, it turns out that the author also included an element of subjectivity as an approach to prove an event that is said to be historical. At the same time, by using these two elements the author has capitalized on it by incorporating elements of myth and legend in his writing. This is because, for the writing of historical literature one of the ways to express the truth is by presenting it at the beginning of the historical writing which is more based on what exists and is believed by society as their beliefs based on myths and legends. This truth does not require tangible evidence enough with just the beliefs or beliefs of the community alone.

Date and time are a very important thing in human life. In life, human beings are inseparable by time and date. Similarly, in history, the main thing that is discussed is about the time and date of an event that occurred in a manuscript patterned Malay historiography. Therefore, an event to be said as history can be proven by the truth of the time and date of an event. This is shown through the Malay historiography *Sulalatus Salatin* which displays the time and date of an event.

Based on the *Sulalatus Salatin* manuscript, it can be seen that one of the most important dates is about the Malay sultanate of Melaka. Therefore, it can be seen that the reign of each sultan has been clearly recorded about the time and date. Based on this *Sulalatus Salatin* manuscript, it displays the beginning of the state of Melaka which was opened by Raja Iskandar. Examples can be seen in the following passages:

*"So the city of Melaka has been made by everyone, let him be silent in Melaka. He was in Singapore for thirty -two years. Singapore was also attacked by Java; he lived in Melaka for three years, then came the circulation of the world, he also died.*  
" (Said, 2003)

Based on the above text can be clearly seen the story of the opening of the state of Melaka by King Iskandar Syah after fleeing from Singapore which was attacked by Majapahit. After that, he lived in Melaka for three years and eventually died there. Prior to that, King Iskandar had ruled Singapore for 32 years. The thing that the researcher wants to emphasize about the text is about the time that the author has written in the manuscript. This can be seen when the author explains about the reign of Raja Iskandar Syah in Singapore for 32 years and when he opened Melaka, he was there for three years before he died.

This is very much in line with the opinion expressed by (Siti Hawa, 1994) who explained that the concept of time in historical literature is not expressed accurately. Timing is one of the things that is inaccurate due to the absence of accurate records and acceptance of time for an event. Therefore, he said that it could be clearly seen that the story of the opening of Melaka was only mentioned in his presence for three years, but the exact date of his reign was not clearly stated. Furthermore, in thinking and presentation of facts also punctuality also does not exist.

(Noor, 2018) who explained about the rule of the Malay sultanate of Melaka based on a source from China by Ma Huan that is the exact dating was taken through a source from China by Ma Huan who then told about his arrival to Melaka. The impressive thing is that Ma Huan has recorded the name of Megat Iskandar Syah as well as listed the names of the kings of Melaka that he had met in 1404-1433. In fact, Ma Huan also described the practice of Islamic teachings among the Malay community at that time such as the practice of fasting, reciting

the Quran and so on. Then it can also be seen when Arba'iyah Mohd Noor explained that Ma Huan also recorded the date of Sultan Alaudin Riayat Syah who only ruled for eight years, starting in 1720 until 1728 AD.

The history of origins is a central matter that is highly emphasized in Malay historiographical texts in particular. This is because, the purpose of writing this work is actually to glorify the Malay kings in ancient times. In fact, these origins are one of the most important things to show the strength and majesty of a king. Therefore, the Malay rulers were very concerned about their origins. This is because, with the origin of the king from something great then it is certain that a king will be admired and respected and admired by his people. Therefore, as can be observed in the *Sulalatus Salatin*, the manuscript is found to display the origins of the king's lineage.

Based on *Sulalatus Salatin*, the greatness of his work is clearly displayed through the origins of his king which are said to be related to an extraordinary power. The origin of the lineage of the kings of Melaka is said to have started with King Iskandar Zul-Karnain. This is clearly shown in the manuscript of *Sulalatus Salatin*:

"... A'lam knows by you, in ancient times, and in times past, said the owner of the story, that king Iskandar, son of King Darab, Rome was his nation, Makaduniah was the name of his state, Zul-Karnain was his title;..." (Said, 2003)

The *Sulalatus Salatin* manuscript shows that the origin of the king of Melaka is said to be from the descendants of King Iskandar Zul-Karnain. This clearly shows that the descendants of the kings of Melaka did not come from a lineage. King Iskandar Zul-Karnain is said to be the son of King Darab who came from the Makaduniah state. Later, he was also said to be a Roman and was called Zulkarnain. Raja Iskandar Zul-Karnain is narrated as the origin of the king of Melaka is because of his greatness and strength that can not be matched by anyone.

Therefore, *Sulalatus Salatin* narrates carefully and deeply about the greatness of its kings. Another very important thing is about the event of the entry of Raja Suran into the sea to the state of Dika. This event even became one of the reasons why many scholars refused to recognize this manuscript as historical in nature. However, if viewed from another angle, the main thing that the Malay community wants to convey is about his thinking which is very critical and has a certain meaning. Of course, the shallow perception is the result of a misunderstanding of Malay thought in the past.

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The state of Melaka is very popular for telling about the opening of its state because the *Sulalatus Salatin* script tells about the events that took place in Melaka. Apart from that, there are also other famous places such as the story of the opening of the state of Singapore which was originally named Temasik. Based on the places that have been described in this manuscript of *Sulalatus Salatin*, it clearly shows that the place mentioned really happened

and exists to this day. The first about the story of the opening of the state of Melaka in Sulalatus Salatin can be seen in the following passage:

*He said, "Well this place is made by the state, dogs are allergic to moths; if the person, how much more?" So all the Great People prayed, "It is true as my lord said." So the king was ordered to be cut, made into a state. So the king said, "What is the name of the wood?" So the people prayed, "Kayu Melaka is the name, my lord," Then King Iskandar Syah said, "If so, Melaka is the name of this state." (Said, 2003)*

The opening event of the state of Melaka began with Raja Iskandar Syah who witnessed the event of a dog being kicked by a moth. This caused him to think that this place was suitable for state development because seeing something small could beat something bigger than it. The event that took place actually gave a sign to Raja Iskandar Syah that, this state will be a very great state. Therefore, he named the state in conjunction with the name of the tree on which he leaned, the Melaka tree.

The existence of Melaka can be seen through the opinion that has been submitted by (Zainal, 1997), that is, he thinks that the state of Melaka is one of the most developed and influential states because there are 84 types of languages used. This is based on historical sources taken from Tom Pires (Corteseo, 2020). Based on the book, Tom Pires explained that in the port of Melaka there are 84 different languages that are often used. This clearly shows that the state of Melaka is not a place designed to exist. In fact, this is based on authentic evidence. In this context can be seen when Zainal Abidin proved the existence of Melaka based on a source from "The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires" which gives a picture of the state of Melaka in terms of language at that time.

The arrival of Islam to the archipelago is an aspect of historiography that is the starting point for the beginning of historical writing. Based on both historiographical manuscripts Sulalatus Salatin clearly displays stories about the state of Malacca when accepting the advent of Islam. Before that, it is necessary to review first about the arrival of Islam in the archipelago which has to do with the Sulalatus Salatin manuscript.

Islamization in Melaka started with Raja Kecil Besar who dreamed of meeting Rasulullah SAW and asked him to say the word syahadah and was followed by Raja Kecil Besar. This event of Islamization is seen in Sulalatus Salatin in the following passages, namely:

*So the Prophet said to the Great Little King, "Say by you: asyhadu alla ilaha I'l Allah wa asyhadu anna Muhammad-ar-rasulullah." So by the Great Little King as the words of Rasulullah salla'llahu 'alaihi wa salam were obeyed. So Rasulullah said to Raja Kecil Besar, "There is also your name Sultan Muhammad Syah."*

Later, the passage also shows the event where the Prophet Muhammad named the Great Little King as Sultan Muhammad Syah. He also told Sultan Muhammad Syah that there would be a ship from Jeddah and people would come down to pray. After he woke up from his dream, he felt his body smelled of narawastu and his pen looked like it had been circumcised. This event is also described in the passage Sulalatus Salatin:

*"After noon, the Big Little King was surprised from the fight, so he kissed his body with the smell of narawastu, and he saw that his words were as if they had been*



*circumcised. In the heart of the Great Little King, "That is my dream. Asyhadu alla ilaha l'Allah wa asyhadu anna Muhammad-ar-rasullah. "*

After that, Sultan Muhamad Syah repeatedly mentioned the word syahadah to the surprise of those who witnessed his behavior. Notice of the arrival of a ship from Jeddah can be seen the next day. The ship actually stopped in Melaka and the name of the ship was Syed Abdul Aziz.

The arrival of Islam and its spread to Melaka can be seen through the following opinions:

*"Syed Abdul Aziz is considered as a scholar of the ahlu-bait of Rasulullah SAW who has converted the King of Melaka to Islam by taking the name of Sultan Muhammad Shah. Therefore, he was appointed as a personal religious teacher to the sultan for eight years. Later, his son, Sayyid Yusuff who later became Maulana Yusuff and his grandson Syed Menawar was appointed as the khadi of Melaka. "*

The event of the Islamization of the Great Little King was not a mere fabricated event. The passage above explains that the arrival of Syed Abdul Aziz really happened and based on the study, it was also found that Syed Abdul Aziz was a scholar of the Ahlu-Bait of the Prophet SAW. Later, the two further explained that Syed Abdul Aziz was appointed as the Sultan's personal religious teacher for eight years. Similarly, his son Sayyid Yusuff and his grandson Sayyid Menawar were appointed khadi of Melaka.

Later, the historical truth about the arrival of Islam and its spread to Melaka is also reinforced by the opinion put forward by (Abdullah, 1992) who explained that Islam had a very strong position during the reign of Sultan Mansur Syah and Melaka was the most important center for the spread of Islam in the region. He further explained that the spread of Islam occurred rapidly due to the implementation of Islamic da'wah which was so influential. This has led to the collapse of the Majapahit kingdom in Java. Therefore, historians explain that the Islamization of Java was from Melaka. This spread of Islam has taken place on a large scale not only to Java but also to Maluku and Borneo

There are many factors that caused the fall of Melaka. One of the most important factors is due to the weakness of the king himself in administering his government, tyrannical attitude towards the people and his own children, the murder of great people in the government, weak state defense and so on.

The fall of the kingdom of Melaka is clearly mentioned in the manuscript Sulalatus Salatin. One of the main reasons was due to the cruelty of his sultan. This can be seen when this manuscript highlights the character of the king which is the culmination of the fall of the kingdom of Melaka, namely Sultan Mahmud Syah who is the sultan of Melaka who is lustful. He was a very selfish man and willing to do anything as long as his goal was achieved. This is clearly shown in Sulalatus Salatin, which is about the murder of Bendahara Seri Maharaja as a result of slander committed by Raja Mendaliar. This event is described as follows:

*So Sultan Mahmud Shah ordered to call Tun Sura Diraja and Tun Indera Segara; after the two came, then he was ordered to kill the Treasurer Seri Maharaja. So they both went with the king's servants.*

The murder of Bendahara Seri Maharaja was one of the heartbreaking events because Bendahara Seri Maharaja was slandered by Raja Mendaliar. Furthermore, Sultan Mahmud Syah's rage against him caused the Bendahara Seri Maharaja to be killed without a motion to inspect and solid evidence. This murder was also driven by the attitude of Sultan Mahmud who was really revengeful with the Bendahara Seri Maharaja who did not show his daughter, Tun Fatimah. His anger increased when Tun Fatimah was married to Tun Ali, the son of Seri Nara Diraja. The fall of Melaka, has a very close relationship with this event because Bendahara Seri Maharaja was one of the efficient strategists. The loss of Bendahara Seri Maharaja will certainly result in no one being able to organize a strategy to defeat the enemy. This is one of the causes and the main cause of the fall of Melaka.

Later, the culmination of the events of the fall of Melaka can be seen in the Sulalatus Salatin which displays the invasion carried out by the Portuguese. This can be seen based on the passage below:

*"So Alfonso d'Albuquerque went down to Goa; also complete in Goa three ships, eight ghalias, four long ghali, sixteen fusta, into forty -three in all, then he left after coming to Melaka, then the people of Melaka were alarmed; then it was presented to Sultan Ahmad Shah, "That Peringgi came to attack us, seven ships, eight ghalias, nine long ghali, sixteen fusta."*

Based on the text, it clearly describes the events of the fall of Melaka that occurred as a result of being attacked by the Portuguese led by Alfonso d'Albuquerque. This attack was so sudden and massive that Melaka was not ready to face the attack. This is because, if viewed in terms of weapons used by the Portuguese government is more sophisticated when compared to Melaka. This is also one of the factors that resulted in Melaka not being able to defeat the Portuguese. If seen from the context of his father to Sultan Ahmad Syah, it can be seen clearly that the events of the fall of Melaka started from Sultan Mahmud.

The event of the fall of the state of Melaka, can be seen through the opinion presented by Yahya Abu Bakar in his study, namely the Moments of Melaka Defending Its Dignity or Dignifying and Defending the Rights and Dignity of Melaka 1511 AD. His opinion can be seen as follows:

*Sultan Mahmud Shah left Melaka on 24 and 25 August 1511 after an intense defensive operation. However, no instrument of surrender or power was made by Melaka to the Portuguese.*

The passage explains that the fall of the kingdom of Melaka can be seen that Sultan Mahmud Syah left Melaka on 24 and 25 August in 1511. He further explained, Sultan Mahmud Syah fled to Melaka after a fierce defense between the two that led to the fall of the kingdom of Melaka. However, he further argued that, there was no instrument of surrender or power made by Melaka to the Portuguese. This shows that, although Melaka suffered defeat, but Melaka did not occasionally submit to the Portuguese.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the aspects of historiography in the two Malay historiographical manuscripts studied can be proven to be true based on historical evidence taken from scholars who submit based on authentic sources. In this context, historical sources displaying the events that took place in the manuscript can be said and acknowledged as historical. Nevertheless, the point that needs to be emphasized by future researchers is that the study of the truly exact date and

time of the events that took place in this manuscript is more specific rather than general. However, this challenge could be argued using the theoretical framework of presentism (Bourne, 2007). Despite the fact that historical literature emphasizes the concept of time in general but, a more in-depth study and as much as possible is highly encouraged especially in preparation to dispel the baseless allegations about this Malay historiographical manuscript. This study can prove that Malay historiographical manuscripts as historical texts. This study focuses on the historical aspects found in the *Sulalatus Salatin* manuscript and examines the extent to which the truth of the events displayed. To achieve that objective, this study uses the theory of New Historicism introduced by (Greenblatt, 2005; Greenblatt, 1982). The findings of this study to identify the historical aspects of *Sulalatus Salatin* and prove the existence of historical aspects found in the manuscript *Sulalatus Salatin*. Future studies could also extend to the global landscape in terms of pedagogical implication such as the perspectives suggested by (Heng, 2022; Zufrie et al., 2020).

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