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PAULINE E. MUIR

A SOUND ETHNOGRAPHY

Abstract

Congregational music and verbal utterances are germane to the liturgical practices of World Christianity. However, despite this significance, methodologies that give primacy to the visual are often privileged. This essay argues for an emphasis on sound in the data collection process, recognizing that while both the visual and the aural are critical elements in the communication exchange, an emphasis on sound can reveal data unavailable elsewhere and uncover a cauldron of ambiguities, contradictions and contentions. Using a model of music discourse (Nattiez:1990) and data drawn from an ethnographic study within the context of a neo-Pentecostal African mega church in the United Kingdom, the function and character of congregational singing and the use of chanted confessions as a signifying practice are analysed. The findings reveal struggle and adaptation highlighting both resistance and assimilation in the sonic field. The essay concludes that paying attention to the sonic representations in congregations may prove to be a fruitful site of inquiry for scholars of World Christianity.

Music, methodology, neo-Pentecostal, congregational singing, confessions, prosperity gospel, mega-church, identity

Introduction

Western culture is dominated by the visual, and ocularcentrism is privileged as the primary way of knowing (Berger 1972). Similar epistemologies are seen in the study of World Christianity despite the oral with an “O” and the aural with an “A” being germane

to the liturgical practice of most churches. Hearing and speaking are integral to worship practice, yet sound is rarely privileged as a means of interrogation or methodological practice in the study of religion. This was also evidenced at the second International, Interdisciplinary Conference, Currents, Perspectives and Ethnographic Methodologies in World Christianity in Princeton (2019) where the keynote addresses focused on the use of images in methodological praxis. Indeed, the primacy of the visual is well established in theology (Begbie 2008:13) and ethnography. Although ethnographers are known as participant 'observers' much of what is collected in the field is heard and the role of engaged listening and being attentive to the ethnographic ear needs equal attention (Forsey 2010: 560), there is little focus on the role of sound in methodological epistemologies. I am intrigued by Carter's (2004) question on what difference would be brought to bear if we 'heard' cultures instead of seeing them? This shift in emphasis can make available data that is not available elsewhere and counteracts the limitations of the visual. While I am not advocating for a total sensory approach although this too has its place, (Bendix 2000) I am encouraging a greater engagement with sound, in the case of my own research, a focus on congregational singing and other verbal utterances, alongside the usual focus on visualism. So not simply to replace one epistemological domination with another, I am suggesting a multimodal analysis which privileges sound and recognizes that cultural and religious meanings are embedded in how a congregation looks as well as sounds. This combination of the visual and the oral can give a much fuller representation of the meaning-making processes, the theological constructions and hierarchies of culture in religious environments.

In this essay, I will not engage with a visual analysis, but will briefly outline how an emphasis on sound and music has uncovered multiple meaning-making processes

within the context of a neo-Pentecostal African megachurch. Music is affective and invested with enormous power, and congregational singing and other verbal utterances when viewed as a semiotic practice is a site where multiple meanings can be found. I will begin by demonstrating how African Pentecostalism has been interrogated through the visual and outline why a focus on sound is advantageous to a study on Pentecostalism in particular but World Christianity in general. I will then analyze the function and character of congregational singing and the use of confessions as a signifying practice in a West African Pentecostal church in South East London in the United Kingdom. Additionally, I will provide a justification for my methodological approach and underscore how a focus on sound brings an important perspective to the study of World Christianity, and thus should not be relegated to the domain of ethnomusicology and musicology.

Visual Cultures of African Pentecostalism

Previous studies have theorized African Pentecostalism through the lens of the visual. Visual cultures and the function of media are representative of what Meyer (2004) refers to as a 'pentecostalite culture,' which acts as a means of corporate presentation in the public square. According to Asamoah-Gyadu (in Clark 2007), Hackett (in Mitchell and Marriage 2003), de Witte (in Meyer 2009) this culture has dominated the film, TV and video industries in West Africa. De Witte in comparing Catholicism with Pentecostalism argues that 'its modern Pentecostal variant has developed a televisual culture in which spiritual power is also mediated by images' (2005: 317). Meyer (2012) discusses the concept of sensational forms to 'produce the divine', arguing that in many African Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches modern media constructs a discursive framework causing the religious experience to be inseparable from the experience of

the media. Morgan (2005) purports that we need to consider how people use images to construct their religious worlds, but with McDannell I assert that ‘the image cannot stand alone, it must be part of a human world of meaning to come alive’ (McDannell 1998:16). I contend that in the case of Pentecostalism we need to understand how sound and music are used in alliance with the visual to construct and perform religious identities, both corporate and personal. Much more could be added to the interrogation if we added an analysis of the sound to the visualization. The vision without the sound is akin to watching television with the volume turned down.

Pentecostalism Experienced through Sound

Global Pentecostalism is diverse, containing competing, even contradictory, theologies and approaches. Nonetheless, Pentecostalism has sound at the core of its ontology. On the day of Pentecost, the supernatural encounter was mediated by the human faculties of the aural and the oral. The Biblical account describes this as follows:

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a *sound* like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.” Acts 2:1 New International Version (NIV)

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to *speak* in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” Acts 2. v4 (NIV). (*italics mine*).

The linkage of the ‘sound’ and the ‘speaking’ from the outset establishes Pentecostalism as an aural and oral experiential encounter with God. Orality is one of the key elements central to Pentecostal identity and construction of self. Pentecostal scholars, Cox (1995)

and Hollenweger (1997 & 1999) refer to the contextual relationship of the practice of Pentecostalism with orality. Cox claims that Pentecostals sing their theology (Cox 1995: 15). Hollenweger (1999: 36) similarly likens a Pentecostal service to a jazz concert, due to the spontaneity embedded in the liturgy. Many Pentecostal believers use speaking in tongues and singing as a means of mediating religious experience, building corporate and individual identity and exhibiting Pentecostal performativity. Therefore, how a church sounds is of critical importance to the Pentecostal Christian. The aural encounter may be the first sensuous experience confronted on entering a Pentecostal church service. Pentecostal Christians may choose not to attend a church due to what is perceived as 'dead worship', deciphered as a code for not liking the music or assessing the quality of music as poor. The manner in which the music is engaged and delivered in a church may also be an indication of the level of the Spirit's activity in that environment. While scholars acknowledge the centrality of sound and music in this environment there is little systematic and sustained attention given to the music and sound of UK Pentecostals. In the next section, I will outline a project that set out to explore the congregational singing and verbal utterances of an African Pentecostal church in South East London, UK.

Background to the Project

The background to the study is the explosion of Pentecostalism(s) globally (Gifford 1998, Asamoah-Gyadu 2005b, Kalu 2008, Ugba 2009, Stewart 2012, Adogame 2008, 2013, 2014), increased migration and notions of reverse mission alongside rapidly growing African Pentecostal mega-churches in the UK (Adogame 2008, Olofinjana 2010, Adedibu 2012). These African Diasporic churches have vibrant congregation singing central to their liturgical practices and public presentation. The oral and visual

significations are associated with and stand for Pentecostalism in general and Black Majority Churches¹ (BMC) in particular. Lively, exuberant sounds, classified by soaring vocals and flashy altered chords, accompanied by smiling, clapping, robbed black bodies swaying in time are emblematic of UK multiculturalism and the epitome of ‘good music’. The social profile surrounding a particular set of sounds are inscribed on a particular set of religious ideologies and ethnicities. African Pentecostalism has overtaken Caribbean Windrush generation churches and is deemed to be one of the fastest growing branches of Christianity both globally (Kalu in Karkkainen: 2009) and nationally (Adedibu 2012) in metropolitan areas in the UK. The aim of the project was to explore to what extent Christian groups originating from West Africa represented a musical and sonic identity to a South London context in an effort to understand how issues of the global and the local are represented in congregational music. The perspective of a multimodal analysis has uncovered multiple meaning-making processes within the context of a neo-Pentecostal megachurch with an emphasis on prosperity gospel.

Methodological Approach - Music Discourse

I have argued that the auditory and the oral are germane to Pentecostalism. In order to capture these domains, I have adopted the position of music as discourse. Previous studies (Cartledge 2006, MacRobert 1989, Edwards 1992, Dixon-Mckenzie 2014) on UK BMC congregational singing are limited and methodological approaches have failed to take account of all elements of the musical text and praxis. I attempted a more wholistic

¹ BMC is a contested term (Gerloff 1992: 25, Trotman in Edwards 1992:26) nonetheless I have chosen the term to locate these entities in a social and historical context as a collective category to identify the multi-denominational Christian tradition established by people from the Caribbean and Africa.

approach influenced by musical semiology partly informed by musicologist Nattiez (1990). According to Nattiez the musical work is:

‘...constituted by procedures that have engendered it, acts of composition and the procedures to which it gives rise: acts of interpretation and perception’

(Nattiez 1990: ix).

Conceding little agreement on what constitutes a musical semiology and pointing to the many schools of thought operating under the umbrella of semiology or semiotics, he prefers to speak of multiple *semiologies* and projects in musical semiology. Accepting that the task of musical semiology is to study the signs in music, wrestling with the conundrum of what constitutes a musical sign, and even disregarding the possibility of meaning in music, Nattiez (1990) nonetheless proposes a tripartite approach in trying to understand how a work of art functions by using three elements to define a ‘total musical fact’. Following Pierce’s (1994) triadic analysis of the sign, rather than Saussure’s (1906) binary approach, his musical semiology identifies the following elements as pivotal:

- 1) *Esthetic* – reconstructs the message(s) and ascertains the reconstruction and experience of the form by receivers.
- 2) *Immanent* or neutral – the trace, the physical, material – the sound/image, the trace accessible to our five senses.
- 3) *Poietic* – the symbolic form, as it appears from the producers. (Nattiez 1990)

These three areas define the totality of the musical discourse and provide a thorough analysis through differing perspectives. If you just explore one perspective, you may

overlook critical ideas in another. This method also allows one to weigh contradictions and similarities that may exist simultaneously.

Ethnography was adopted as the most appropriate means to collect data. The traditional long commitment and immersion in the field enabled an observation of, participation and listening to participants in a 'natural' setting while writing descriptive details as a means of understanding symbolic worlds and building theory (Angrosino 2007). I attempted a mitigation of a solely subjective rendering of the aural in three ways. Firstly, I participated in and recorded congregational worship in the main service and in house-groups; secondly, I listened to sermons, casual conversations before and after church, attended social functions; and thirdly, I interviewed members of the Praise and Worship team, pastors and music industry professionals. This combination of listening, participating in and recording served to attenuate the dominance of the visual and provided a rich data set to present the musicological features, hear the voices of the respondents and enhance the ethnographic product.

This process of data collection enabled an interrogation of the congregational singing from several vantage points. Firstly, exploring the worship in its context; secondly, understanding the music from the point of view of the people engaged in its production, and thirdly understanding broader industry influences. This analysis of the congregational music enabled an interrogation of the cultural values embedded in the sound of the church and revealed some of the tensions and contradictions therein. In the next section, I will discuss the three areas of the music discourse in turn.

Esthetic

I interpreted the esthetic i.e., the experience of the receiver - in two ways. First, internally by observation and listening to the Praise and Worship session in the Sunday morning services. It was clear that the congregation engage with Praise and Worship as a spiritual exercise. It is part of the Pentecostal ritual that facilitates an encounter with the divine. This meaning-making process performs a psychological and spiritual refreshing. In short, Praise and Worship fulfil a critical role in Pentecostal environments as an enjoyable spiritual practice. This is demonstrated by the following ethnographic product describing a part of a Praise and Worship session:

The words of the song 'Can't stop praising, can't stop dancing' gives permission for the congregation to engage in bodily movement – at this point the singing stops and people start to dance. This represents an emotional high point – many people have hands lifted in the air – mouthing words, eyes tightly closed, moving in time with the music.

Worship Leader: 'Come on church, let me hear you sing...'

The chorus comprises of a repeating Hallelujah on a two-note motif repeated several more times. The congregation and the Worship Leader enter into a protracted call and response play on the words – many people are smiling and laughing. The song eventually comes to a long-extended ending with singers in harmony on the final note. This culminates in claps, cheers and shouts of Hallelujah. Celebration and pleasure are central to the experience.

Listening to the congregation it was clear that the Praise and Worship session lasting 40 minutes of a two-hour service emphasize the centrality of music to the environment. The activity functions as a ritual experience characterised by improvisation and

spontaneity. These features are noted in the visual observations of the dance, but also in the sounds of the hand claps, repetitions, the unscripted vocal injections of the worship leader. The music was often loud, professionally executed, visually beautiful and sonically exhilarating. These findings in the musical discourse are in keeping with others identified by previous scholars writing about UK Black Pentecostalism (Smith 1989, Edwards 1992; Beckford 1998 & 2000, Sturge 2005, Aldred 2005, MacRobert 1989, Dixon-McKenzie 2014; Adedidu 2012).

However, these scholars do not engage with the provenance of the songs. Utilising the model of music discourse, enabled me to also consider another aspect of the esthetic, that is the external receivers. By documenting the songs sung in the Sunday morning service over a 6-month period, I was able to identify common repertoires utilised by the congregation. I further analysed this material by using Christian Copyright License International (CCLI). This system uses an external verification of receivers. CCLI is the licensing body for church music globally. Churches do not need a license to engage in an act of worship, i.e., the singing of songs, but they do need a license to reproduce lyrics. To photocopy or project lyrics without a license is an infringement of copyright, and churches could be persecuted. The fees from the license is passed on to songwriters and publishers who have signed up to the system and ensures that royalties are paid when material is used. The CCLI framework is an important mechanism, as the charts they produce give insight to what is regarded as popular both nationally and globally. Evans (2006) argues that the esthetic is a difficult parameter to judge given the multiplicity of views and opinion that can emerge from receivers. Therefore, in order to gain a more precise measure, I have used the CCLI to ascertain how particular repertoires are

viewed by multiple audiences. This framework is the pop charts for the global Christian music industry and these types of charts are a 'conveniently attainable method to glean insights' (Evans 2006: 113) into this level of operation.

My analysis of the songs sung in the service found that the majority were in the CCLI charts, with many in the top 20. White UK worship leaders such as Matt Redman and Tim Hughes² were popular favourites, as was music from the Australian megachurch Hillsong.³ African American artists such as Israel Houghton and Fred Hammond were also in evidence, but these occupied a lower percentage. 19th-century hymns also featured. All of these songs are representative of what may be defined as a standard Pentecostal repertoire - arguably typical of what may be encountered in many Pentecostal churches globally. Clearly, the songs in the CCLI chart hold hegemonic power in congregational music globally.

During the period of cataloguing, there were no songs that could be identified or authored as Caribbean or African, and this includes British Caribbean or African. With a choir of some 50 participants and a highly accomplished worship team comprising some professional singers and musicians, there was a paucity of original material introduced or played.

² Ingalls (2016) cites how British worship music had a huge impact on the US worship industry. The outcome of which was to prioritize the marketing and promotion of UK songwriters resulting in a greater demand amongst the US market. Given the size and the success of worship music in the US, this move jettisoned some of the popular UK artists in the mainstream of this global industry.

³ Hillsong, arguably one of the most successful elements of the global Praise and Worship output. Hillsong, started in August 1983, founded by Brian and Bobbie Houston has attracted a good deal of academic attention in the field (Connell 2005, Evans 2006, Goh 2008, Riches and Wagner 2012, Wagner 2014, Hartje-Doll 2013, Evans 2015). According to Evans (2006) \$21,000,000 is amassed each year from recording sales and Hillsong is engaged in creating transnational, global Christian music which is the same whether you are in Sydney or in Singapore.

Immanent

Secondly, I assessed the immanent elements, i.e., the music itself. Here I have isolated the sounds of the music, that is melody, harmony, timbre, lyrics using the language of musicology. This performative element is important in understanding the music as music and avoids the reductionism of purely assigning sociological or theological roles to the music. However, for the purposes of this essay and to emphasis my point that music discourse can be utilised by the non-specialist, I will not present the detailed findings from the musicological analysis and have limited this perimeter to listening and responding to the style of the music. Following the findings from the previous category, despite the emphasis on Hillsong and CCM, stylistic amendments were made to adhere to a black church aesthetic. The rock pop guitar style characteristic of CCM were altered using chords, rhythms and timbres more commonly associated with an African American gospel sound. According to one respondent,

‘...Because even the Hillsong stuff we do, I still feel we make it Black. We don’t make it so hill songy - like you feel it’s all English people singing’

The term ‘Blackening’ is relevant here. Costen (1993) uses this term to describe how African Americans changed the structure of Euro-American hymns and reshaped them in a folk-like manner to make them more accessible to the social and spiritual needs of the singers (Costen 1993: 98). Smith uses the term in a more prescriptive manner describing how a very deliberate process involves changing the rhythm, texture and harmonic structure of a piece to sonically stamp a difference and separation from white

hymnody. She identifies that this 'Blackening makes it part of the community's expression and gives it a new immediately recognisable identity' (Smith: 1998: 73). This process of 'Blackening' is not the same in every social and historical context, but it marks a deliberate and essential process of imposing a different musical identity on found materials to make it different. So, while many of the songs were relatively simple using stepwise movements in the bass, it is the use of the chordal structures played by the keyboard and syncopated rhythms in the drums that creates the complexity and process of 'Blackening'. However, the 'Blackening' in this instance in most cases mostly references an African American sound, rather than a West African sound. My respondent above differentiates a 'sound' of English people. The racialised indicator references the binary opposition of white and black. Nonetheless, it problematises the notion of a homogenous representation and suggests a hierarchy of blackness. An African American blackness was privileged in this context, while the West African blackness was silenced. The situation is further complicated when one considers that the economic beneficiaries of the song selections via the CCLI system were mainly white British, American and Australian Praise and Worship leaders.

Poietic

My third mode of analysis from the music discourse was the poietic – the producers. I explore the poietic level by using semi-structured interviews with the Praise and Worship team in the church in order to understand their perspective on the codes and the modes of the music. In this context, the Praise and Worship team are both producers and receivers. They were the carriers of the music, but they are also members of the congregation. I supplemented this material with key members of the Christian music

industry in the UK. This perspective is important to understand the meanings that are brought to bear on the music; it also enables the story of music in the church to be told against a background of what was happening in the world of the global Christian music industry.

The fellowship had started as a small group meeting in the local community centre. Growing quickly, they moved to a large grade two listed building. The privileging of music in the environment necessitated the employment of full-time minister⁴ of music engaged to 'Bring the X factor to the church'. All members of the Praise and Worship team were auditioned and many of the former team were not re-engaged. It was important to the leadership that the music was of the highest possible standard, and artistic excellence was the determining factor in the selection for the new team.

There was also a change to the repertoire. Interviewees spoke about a directive issued by the leadership to replace the African songs and sounds and adopt a more 'modern' and mainstream sound. This cohered with my findings of the esthetic. The lead pastor articulated thus in a sermon:

We are an international worship centre. Regardless of how it may appear in the natural, we are not a Nigerian church, an African church or even a Black church. We are called to be a church for all nations and the culture of this church must represent the plethora of cultures represented in this nation and must be conducive for everyone to fit.

⁴ These appointments are unusual in the UK and are generally only undertaken by megachurches

The move to the Grade-2 listed building coincided with a new orientation of social standing from an African church singing Yoruba choruses to an international worship centre singing CCM and Hillsong. Repertoire selection is the primary medium of advancement commanding a more globalised advantage, and a posture to the local community in service to reverse mission. But this definition of the local also raises questions about whose locality gains primacy. One off visits to African megachurches in London, and interview material from my music industry experts indicate similar practices suggesting a homogenisation and standardisation in worship music, which has resulted in a cultural erasure. It is clear from the CCLI top 100 songs that members of BMCs do not control the production of original artistic creation, circulation or distribution despite a black Christian music industry and many singers and musicians trained in the church prominent in the secular music industry. Furthermore, they are not the economic beneficiaries of the cultural production of Christian music in the UK despite being the fastest growing segment of Christianity⁵ (Brierley 2013).

Verbal Utterances

In the next section, I will discuss the role of chants and confessions in the service. Positive confessions are an important part of prosperity teaching, the most prominent theological doctrine at my primary case study. Believers are taught that they have the ability to 'speak' things into being. While much of the research pertaining to the prosperity gospel focuses on theological and socio-political impacts (Perriman 2003; Harrison 2005; Bowler 2013), we can gain a deeper insight into how religious meaning,

⁵ According to Brierley (2013) 19% of the UK Black population attend church on a Sunday, this rises to 50% when considering London. BMC scholars (Sturge 2005 & Adedibu 2012) wisely caution that numerical growth is not the only indicator of health.

in this instance a prosperity gospel, is dramatized, verbalised and reproduced within the context of a UK BMC.

Confessions were written annually by the leader of the church to cohere with the theme for the year. Two confessions are repeated in each service. The first is a general prosperity chant and the second below was performed weekly just before the offering.

'Empowered to Prosper'

I am a covenant child

Of a covenant keeping God

I am walking in the covenant of...

Grace

Favour

Blessings

Increase

Multiplication

I am empowered to prosper

I am anointed to create wealth

I am blessed beyond measure.

The Lord has increased me more and more

The Lord has increased my greatness

And comforted me on every side.

God's grace abounds towards me

In all things and at all times

I have everything I need

My resources are overflowing

I am wealthy in every way.

I am generous and I abound in every good work

I excel in the grace of giving

My hands are blessed

Anything I touch

Flourishes and prospers

I am rich

I am wealthy

There is overflowing abundance

In every area of my life.

My seed is on divine assignment

So, I send you

As a response of my faith

Go and grow!

And I'll see you later

In your multiplied form

In Jesus name

This was a performed event and is delivered as a call and response between the minister and congregation in a declamatory manner, half speaking, half shouting. There were pauses at the end of lines to allow for dramatic effect. The strong Nigerian accent of the preacher lent gravitas to the performance. He allowed the confession to establish its own rhythm, sometimes speeding up or slowing down depending on the fervour of the congregation, but always ending in a grand crescendo with several repetitions on lines such as Go and Grow! These lines were repeated to underscore meaning and invigorate faith. Confessions of this type were significant not only in the verbal content, but in the sonic declaration to inspire and enliven faith. Several hundred voices in a megachurch environment combined together create a visceral and embodied experience. The declamatory mode, the volume, the antiphonal texture, the pacing, the repetition are sonic features that denote power, triumph, overcoming and victory. Hence, the manner was as important as the matter in conveying and reinforcing the ideals of a prosperity gospel. This is a significant meaning-making device for communicating the ideals of a prosperity gospel, transmitted through the medium of sound.

This call and response activity also communicated another element in the sign-meaning stratosphere. Beckford (1998) identifies this type of interaction as having its origins in traditional African societies and it is often claimed to be indicative of African American music. According to Tomlin: 'The distinctive rhythmic nature and cadence of many interlocutors in the diaspora is a marker that appears to be an African import.' (Tomlin 2019:95) This feature relates to the 'Blackening' referred to above. The activity is accompanied by musicians, enabling a continuation of the stylistic characteristics. Although most religions use chant as a means of ritual practice (Beck 2006) and for neo-

Pentecostals its use is normative, I would like to suggest that in this context the distinctive features of the music, the lilt and texture of the preacher's Nigerian accent, the tempo, the timbre and tone of this confession, establishes it as black church signifier. While it may be critiqued for its 'Simple Simon' approach, call and response as a participatory activity constructs an aesthetic experience. Frith (1996) refers to it as music's ability to create experience by putting on subjective and collective identity – it helps to build a sense of community, albeit imagined. It assists individuals to get to themselves 'as groups' by participation (Frith 1996).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that attention to the ecology of sound can open up vistas of possibility in determining meaning-making processes in congregations. My research identified struggle and adaptation in navigating notions of the global and local. Rejection of the Yoruba choruses could be read as a migrant congregation attempting to reflect a new locality in a South London context whilst embracing a global Pentecostal identity through the adoption of a mainstream Christian repertoire. On the other hand, the 'blackening' of the CCM songs and the execution of the confessions belies a hybridity and resistance to total assimilation, evoking DuBois' (1903) double consciousness. Attentiveness to sound can reveal the compromise and power struggles that take place in religious communities. With increasingly globalised congregations, scholars of World Christianity may be able to gather unique insights and capture new data by being attentive to the sonic representations that exist in congregations. With Attali I contend that:

'For twenty-five centuries Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for beholding. It is for hearing...Now we must learn to judge a society by its noise.' (Attali 1985:3).

Biographical note

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