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Ramzi Rouighi, *Inventing the Berbers. History and Ideology in the Maghrib*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 312 pp. Bibliography and index. \$79.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780812251302.

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“Jugurtha représente l’Africain du Nord, c’est-à-dire le Berbère, sous sa forme la plus accomplie: le héros dont le destin historique peut être chargé d’une signification mythologique. [...] Jugurtha s’adapte à toutes les conditions, il s’est acoquiné à tous les conquérants ; il a parlé le punique, le latin, le grec, l’arabe, l’espagnol, l’italien, le français, négligeant de fixer par l’écriture sa propre langue ; il a adoré, avec la même passion intransigeante, tous les dieux. Il semblerait donc qu’il fût facile de le conquérir tout à fait. Mais à l’instant même où la conquête semblait achevée, Jugurtha, s’éveillant à lui-même, échappe à qui se flattait d’une ferme prise.”

Jean Amrouche, *L’Éternel Jugurtha*[1]

The title of the book under review, *Inventing the Berbers*, is obviously a provocation. The title challenges the generally accepted recognition of the Berbers as a people, suggesting that they did not exist in the first place and by extension do not exist in the present. Still, academics such as myself know about the necessity to attract readership with sulfurous or irreverent titles. And so I pressed on and diligently read every page of Rouighi’s book, for troubling books when they are insightful are worth the discomfort. While the refusal to recognize Berbers as a people has been the stance of several North African governments and Arab-Islamist circles, Rouighi strives to pinpoint the originary moment of the naming of the Berbers. Rouighi follows with a history of the word “Berber” in Arabic documents (genealogical and scholarly references) leading to his argument that the word and thus the people, Berbers, were invented by Arabs who, with time, and especially with the distribution and success of work by the famous Arab historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), led to a “berberized” region, an act he calls “Berberization.”

The main achievement of this book resides in the collection of Arabic references about the word Berber and the people called Berbers. Rouighi hunted down the word Berber in all the earliest Arabic texts he could get a hold of and examined their use of the word Berber and its meaning, and then built his main argument about the “Berberization” of North Africa. A large chunk of the book is dedicated to questioning the work of Ibn Khaldun. More specifically, Rouighi’s purpose is to challenge Ibn Khaldun’s take on the Berbers, which Rouighi argues contributed to creating the Berbers as a group, and to retrace the dissemination of and use of his work and ideas. However, from the start, Rouighi moves beyond an interesting textual history to the communal

and political, and peremptorily declares that “[n]o one was a Berber in northwest Africa before the seventh century and that is when this study must begin” (p. 8) and “[t]his book is not a history of the Berbers. The focus here is not on what happened to the Berbers, but rather on how it became possible to think that something happened to Berbers in the first place” (p. 9). These two sentences provide the main impetus and argument of the book, its framework along with its limitations.

Inventing the Berbers hinges on the argument that the term “Berber” (in Arabic, *barbar*) was first used by Muslim Arab invaders to refer to people they encountered in North Africa; back then, these people were known by different names and, according to Rouighi’s reading of the early Arabic authors and later Ibn Khaldun, their origins were multiple, unstable, or ambiguous. However, despite this diversity of names and geographical origins, the word “Berber” was applied to all of these peoples, who were brought together as one people on one vast Berber territory, a process that Rouighi calls “Berberization.”

The project of exploring the word “Berber” in early Arabic writings is in itself a valuable inquiry when it is done critically the way Raymond Williams addresses terminology in his *Keywords*.^[2] Tracing the root of a word, like in Greek or Latin is one way of viewing etymology, the inference being that the root is the origin, which determines the sense of the word. Another way to trace the sense(s) of a word is to offer a history of usage, as people spoke, wrote, and used a given word. Either way, one needs to be comprehensive. Though Rouighi offers a history of the term “Berber” drawn from Arabic sources, that attempt is incomplete as there are other prior and subsequent uses of the word in other languages and historical moments. His historization’s objective, to fix the sense of the word in its first usages, prevents any alternative interpretation. How could one, then, understand the cooptation of this epithet as a rallying cry for Imazighen (the term that Berbers use today to refer to themselves) to oppose repressive regimes in the twentieth century?

For Rouighi, it seems as if the act of naming a people makes this people appear and exist: “Starting with zero Berbers in Northwest Africa, Arabic authors gradually populated the region, they called the Maghrib with Berbers” (p. 15). However, when people are named by others, as is the case here, the former existed prior to their being “discovered” and named. The act of naming in this instance only speaks of the novelty for the person who encounters them for the first time. There is one thing Rouighi is correct about: Berbers did not call themselves Berbers, just like other indigenous peoples such as Native Americans did not call themselves Indians before the arrival of the invaders. The term “Berber” is the name of the Other, whether it is of Greek, Latin, or Arab origin.

In addition to naming the Berbers, Rouighi argues that early Arab writers, and especially Ibn Khaldun, brought the Berbers into being as a people and united them, well before the French colonial government did its part by isolating and highlighting the differences between Berbers and their Arab compatriots. According to Rouighi, scholars have neglected to recognize this pre-French “Berberization,” and so have failed to “historicize” the Berbers. Ignoring Berberization he argues, amounts to a falsification of history that continues today. This historical mistake, for Rouighi, has serious consequences.

This is an idea that Rouighi reiterates throughout the book, like a litany: “Before Muslim Arab conquerors began using the word *barbar* to refer to people who lived in what they called ‘the West’ (*al-maghrib*), both people and region were known by a host of other names” (p. 1). Indeed,

Rouighi found a wealth of different meanings associated with the word “Berber.” Here are pell-mell some of those meanings: the term Berber was used to refer to “unbelievers,” “antagonist,” “the enemy” (p. 27), “devils,” “socially subordinate Muslim,” (p. 39), or a people lacking intelligence (“a people who do not have that intelligence...lacked intellectual savoir-faire”) (p. 58). The category “Berber” was also used “to disparage opponents” (p. 57). The use of the term “Berber” to refer to slaves is discussed in different parts of the book, and was probably a widespread designation, especially after the Arab invasions: “In the Mashriq, Berber became a brand of slave. In the Maghrib, Berber was a category used to describe the peoples conquerors encountered, ... [T]he Berberization of various groups followed from the practice of the Arab conquerors of applying the same category to all those who resisted them” (p. 43).

With such a rich negative lexicon, one could produce a valuable reading of the way indigenous peoples were perceived by the invaders, with the predictable prejudice and ignorance of the lives and communal terms of the conquered. For Rouighi, this diversity of meanings is instead evidence of the semantic richness and diversity of the word Berber in early Arabic texts and, importantly for him, proof that the word was used indiscriminately to refer to many different peoples, evidence that the Berbers were not a people nor indigenous to the region. Rouighi notes that there is no scholarly consensus on whether there was one or several peoples and argues that sometimes, as with Ibn Khaldun, both mutually exclusive propositions are held true at the same time (p. 79).

Rouighi also calls into question the Berber language, Tamazight. For linguists, Rouighi writes, “the question of the origins of Berber is largely settled. Like Arabic and Punic, Berber came from the East, just earlier than they did” (p. 4). Even following Rouighi’s proposal, if the Berber language comes from the same place as Arabic, only a “bit” earlier, then North Africa was populated by people from a common geographical origin who are now reunited in the same place and speak Arabic. Thus, he would argue, there is no meaningful claim to be made for Amazigh indigeneity, a position which only supports the current and prevalent Arab nationalist ideology throughout North Africa.

Others would disagree; the origin of the Berber language is not settled. Theories of its Middle Eastern origin have been rebutted, and many linguists and scholars have argued that the origin of Tamazight is local.[3] Further, there is no source, whether Egyptian, Latin, Arab, or Greek, that has ever mentioned any other indigenous language than Tamazight (Berber) in North Africa. To the contrary, scholars have established the stability of the language across a vast territory between 10,000–4500 B.C.E. and the unity of the Tamazight grammatical system. But even if the entire arsenal Rouighi deploys in his book to deny Berbers’ unity was valid, one must consider the significance of the political imaginary at work here, which is based in a common language.

Rouighi’s position with regard to the Arabic origin of the word “Berber” may seem innocuous. However, it has been argued by scholars that the term stems from the Greek *barbaroi* and its original application to the indigenous peoples of North Africa came with the Roman occupation of North Africa who deemed them uncivilized people. Thus, Rouighi ignores the pre-Arab and pre-Islamic history of the region and its people and has chosen to start his research and book with the Arab conquests of the seventh century. It is important to note, Imazighen entered history well before the Arabs did and before being “invented” by the Arabs. Imazighen had an alphabet called Tifinagh which is now in use in North Africa and which dates back to the fourth century B.C.E. Among well-known Amazigh personalities who predate the Arab invasions are

Juba I, St Augustine, Syphax, Massinissa and Tacfarinas. Jugurtha, king of Numidia and hero of the resistance against Roman occupation, is one of these important figures. For Kabyle poet and journalist Jean Amrouche, whose quotation opens this review, Jugurtha is the archetypal figure of the Berber, who is passionate and free. He endures many subjugations but is never totally conquered. Today's Imazighen regard Jugurtha as one of their major ancestors. In *Inventing the Berbers*, these figures along with several centuries of existence are dismissed in order to contain the history of the indigenous people of North Africa to the restrictive historical period within which Rouighi frames them.

The question of the origin of the Berbers is an old one, so some contextualization and historicization is needed. During the Middle Ages, the time frame of most of Rouighi's book, the myth of the Berbers' origins arose in part because of the latter's revolts. Indeed, according to Maya Shatzmiller, Berber revolts caught the attention of oriental historians, as she refers to the Arab historians, as "the problem posed by their existence." To resolve it, the oriental historians tried to incorporate the Berbers into history in their own way, basing the origins of the Berbers on biblical stories and tribal structures.[4]

Rouighi briefly addresses the origins of the Berbers in his introduction, despite declaring that his study starts in the seventh century with the Arab conquests. Rouighi ventures into prehistoric time to raise concerns about the proto-Berbers who occupied the region: "The notion that all prehistoric human settlements found in North Africa are related to the Berbers is not universally accepted" (p. 5). Rouighi adds that "the idea that proto-Berbers emerged only 10,000 years or so ago, or maybe only 7,000 years ago in the Sahara, leaves us with a very long time of non-Berber human presence in the area" (p. 6). Rouighi also laments that rudiments of Berber language turn out to be "tied to art" (p. 5) and adds that "without a linguistic definition, there is no reason why the proto-Berbers could not be proto-Algerians, or proto-Maghribis" (p. 6). And so, while Rouighi points to the obvious, namely a lack of detailed information about the people living in North Africa 10,000 years ago, there is obviously more at stake here, namely questioning the Berbers' indigeneity. Otherwise, why does he suggest proto-Berbers be called "proto-Algerians" or "proto-Maghribis"? Clearly, both of his counter-suggestions evacuate the term "Berber" and either project an anachronistic alternative (Algeria was not a country and did not exist as such before colonization) or is subjective ("Maghrib" is the Arab designation for the region). Rouighi's suggestions are, then, politically tendentious and disregard the multidisciplinary scholarship--textual and materialist--concerning Berbers, which demonstrate that the longest communal presence in North Africa is Amazigh (Berber).

Ibn Khaldun believed that the Berbers settled in North Africa after the Biblical Flood, to which Rouighi responds, "For him, the long period of their residency in the Maghrib makes it their home" (p. 126). While no one today can seriously speculate on who exactly was living in North Africa 20,000 years ago, it is certain that 10,000 years ago, the people who will be called Berbers already lived in the region and no other group did or does make a counter-claim. Additionally, according to Mary Louise Pratt, indigeneity as well as associated terms such as Native, aboriginal, and First Nations all refer etymologically to "prior-ity" in time and place. They "denote those who were 'here (or there) first' that is, before someone else who came 'after.'" There is some irony here for although indigenous "are marked as having 'prior-ity' in relation to the invaders, what in fact has priority is the invader's temporality. It is only with reference to the invader's temporality that the indigenous was 'already' there." [5] Thus, Berber indigeneity is

finally articulated because of the new presence of the invaders. Berbers are indigenous since they were “already” there.

Rouighi’s claims to “historicize” the process of “Berberization” has a context and is political. As Carl L. Becker wrote, “[a]ll historical writing, even the most honest, is unconsciously subjective, since every age is bound, in spite of itself, to make the dead perform whatever tricks it finds necessary for its own peace of mind.”[6] As a scholar whose expertise is Middle Eastern studies, Rouighi treats North Africa as an extension of the Middle East and the Arab world, not so much because of his professed lack of interest in the Berbers as such, but rather because of his exclusive interest in what Arabs wrote about them. This leads him to deny the legitimacy of Imazighen claims to indigeneity and to communal unity in their diversity. This position is a familiar Arab-Islamic political position, the doctrines of which have been ruthlessly implemented across North Africa since the nations gained independence.

Of course, pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism are also two major political movements that have shaped the politics of the modern Middle East. Pan-Islamism emerged during the late nineteenth century with the objective of unifying the Muslim world, while pan-Arabism or Arab nationalism (*al-quwmiyya al-arabiyya*) followed later with the objective of unifying the Arab peoples. Arab nationalists consider the Arab world, which stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf area and from the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean, to be a single, homogeneous whole, and the Arab people to be a single nation bound by the common ties of language, culture and history.[7] “The promotion of Muslim political unity and of Arab unity,” writes Jawad, “has been taking place since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries respectively” (p. 141). Egyptian Gamal Abdel Nasser was the incarnation of Pan-Arabism and Arabization. After the independences across North Africa, the new governments wanted to create a unifying identity based on Arabness and Islam, an Arab-Islamic identity. For instance, faced with a population that was not formally educated in Arabic and who either spoke *darja* or no Arabic at all (that is those who spoke Berber or French), the newly independent Algerian government brought in Arabic teachers from Egypt to Arabize the population, and islamize it, (for Arabic is considered a holy language and Pan-Arab ideology utilized Islam in the formation of Arab nations). In Algeria, the government worked hard to erase anything considered other, that is non-Arab or non-Muslim, which would include the Christian and Jewish population as well as regional Islamic sects and animist Amazigh practices. In this context, Berbers were viewed as divisive and threatened the construction of Arab unity, and were suppressed for *fitna* (sedition).[8] Arab historians took up the cause as well, as their motto; “with a pen, the Arabs will be united” makes clear. Indeed, the Union of Arab Historians was founded in 1973 in part to “re-write the history of the Arab Nation [...] to efface all negative interpretations that were inserted into it, and to present the positive aspects that will contribute to the revival and prosperity of the Nation.”[9]

Simply put, Rouighi’s reading and understanding of the Berbers is derivative and supportive of a pan-Arab ideology, echoing a common tactic of North African governments and Arab nationalists who accuse Berbers and the “others” of working on behalf of France, the former colonizer. In Algeria, Berbers and Berber militants have been dubbed *hizb frança* (literally the party of the French), and occasionally accused of conspiracy with Israel. Anything identified as Berber was marked with the French seal.[10] For historian Omar Carlier, “the neurosis and myth of Hizb França” was produced by a “neocolonial crispation.”[11] The *hizb frança* epithet (or the threat of a plot or alliance with Israel) are, alas, clichés that Rouighi deploys when he refers to “the colonial policy of recruiting Berbers from Kabylie to work in the mines and factories

of France,” (p. 195) and when he writes that, “[i]n the view of the pied-noirs, the ‘Arab’ was the primary cause of the failure of a civilizing effort... [T]he ‘Berber’ was a friendlier native” (p. 196). Or when he writes about “the involvement of Israel...in supporting secessionist Berberist parties” (p. 196). These unsubstantiated claims only perpetuate familiar, vicious, and dangerous clichés about Berbers.

Rouighi’s Arab nationalist “historicizing” is also evident in his critique and dismissal of French scholarship on the grounds that these scholars lacked access to or were ignorant of Arabic sources, or “[w]ithout Arabic sources to guide them,” like Malter-Brun’s reliance on ancient Greek and Roman authors (p. 138). Against French scholarship, Rouighi upholds Arabic sources as the definitive means to “understand” and historicize the Berbers. If one is interested in Berberization, and Arabization for that matter (which refers to an actual policy of erasure in order to fabricate something that did not exist), access to all scholarship (including pre- and post-Arab writings) is imperative. Aptly, Rouighi’s final line tells us, “it is necessary to recognize and acknowledge the fingerprints of colonial ideologies and postcolonial realities on attempts to configure a past for the region and its peoples. And so, again, the invention of the Berber is and has always been historical” (p. 198).

Championing the act of decolonizing history is a commendable posture. With regard to French colonial history, many postcolonial scholars have already taken up this task and there is a strong body of critical literature in French and English. Yet, from the perspective of the Berbers, both the Arabs and the French were invaders and came to North Africa to conquer it with violence. The former came with the sword and the Koran, the latter with guns, ships, and the Bible. For a full and complex understanding of the present and past, a true historicization, all sources must be interrogated for a meaningful decolonization.

It is strange that I have to point out today that indigenous perspectives are part of any decolonizing project, yet Rouighi refuses this perspective and attacks any Berber claim or right to indigeneity. Indeed, for Rouighi, even the term “Amazigh” is tainted by colonization: “‘Amazigh’ could not fully conceal its colonial birthmark, however. Its rejection of Arab imperialism of centuries past, its search for an authentic indigenous category, and its reliance on the fruits of colonial historiography, epigraphy, and linguistics to do so are all telltale signs. [...] ‘Amazigh’ (indigeneity) was the parting gift of a dying colonialism to the frail nationalisms it had never accepted. Pulling the rug from under ‘Algeria’ and ‘Morocco’ which as the *colons* repeated were new and artificial, ‘Amazigh’ dealt a blow to anticolonial nationalism” (p. 188).

In addition, and despite his reiteration of purported collusion between the Berbers and the French colonizers, this claim suggests that the word “Amazigh” was pushed (invented?) by the French, along with the claim of indigeneity. However, the term “Amazigh” is an ethnonym that goes back to antiquity.[12] Used by some Berbers in Morocco who called themselves Imazighen and their language Tamazight, the term is also used in many other parts of North Africa with some variation. The term *tamazight* is an autoglossonym (the name of the language in that language) and finally, the term “Amazigh” is the name with which all the indigenous people of North Africa identify. Self-identification is one of the elements of indigeneity according to the United Nations.[13] Although indigenous peoples have been the object of research for several centuries, it was only in 2007 that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples officially recognized indigeneity as “a state of being” with “some legal rights.”[14] So the field of indigenous studies, for instance, exists today not because it creates its object of study but

because of the realization--political recognition--of the importance of this field of research, just as, say, the neologism *femicide* does not mean that there were no sex-based crimes in the past but that societies have become more aware of their significance. In another language turn, Rouighi uses some terminology without critical reflection, as when he exclusively uses the term "Maghrib" to refer to North Africa (with a few exceptions when he uses "Northwestern Africa"). The word Maghrib, as he explains, comes from the Arabic word "al-Maghrib" which means "the west." This geographical location calls attention to a center, which would be the Arabian Peninsula and the "Maghrib" its periphery. That the entire North African region is only construed as a periphery of the Arab world does not concern the author. Instead, he rejects the term "North Africa" which he argues is associated with the French colonial system although objectively North Africa is a more neutral term than Maghrib since it refers to the region's geographical location for indeed North Africa is located to the north of the African continent. Of course, one could also use the Amazigh term for the entire region: Tamazgha.

As Rouighi claims in the opening of his book, his focus is not "on what happened to the Berbers" (p. 9). Well, maybe it should have been, at least a little. Rouighi's argument and underlying interest exclusively rests on negations: the Berbers were not a people and were not indigenous to North Africa. Rouighi's history is the history of the victors. Obviously, there is more to the Berbers than what the early Arab writers and those who followed wrote about them. This is why a contrapuntal reading of history is so important, that is, a reading of the history of the Berbers and the Berber people today from an albeit submerged, but emergent Berber perspective. When Rouighi writes "Berber was an epithet that lumped groups together, and was mostly reserved for groups of unknown identity--or for those whose identity was not worth knowing. Berbers lived far from urban centers, were either rebellious or refractory, and were mostly an unpleasant bunch" (p. 57), I see peoples who are not seen or understood. I see a blatant ignorance and dismissal of the Amazigh language and culture, and the history of a conquered people. And I see the violence of this invasion when Rouighi writes that slavery was "central to the functioning of the military conquests (*futuh*)" (p. 81) and Berber slaves were simply "a known and appreciated commodity" (p. 81) and that they were, like all slaves, "to be compared to objects and animals, rather than to other peoples like the Arabs" (p. 82). Suffice to note that *futuh*, the Arabic term for conquest literally means "openings," as in "liberation," to understand the importance of one's perspective. And yet, I also see in these quotations the resilience and diversity of Berbers. Revisiting history, historicizing in the best self-critical tradition, means reexamining the ideologies and epistemologies upon which history was and is still based. Revisiting the history of North Africa must include the Amazigh perspective, which will provide a new paradigm and to that end it is imperative that Imazighen start writing their own story for, as the African proverb tells us, until the lions have their storytellers (or historians), the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

At the conclusion of his book, Rouighi pronounces his ultimate objective: "This book has sought to establish Berberization as an object of historical study" (p. 192). Yet, for someone so indebted to a Pan-Arabist historical project, and with so little interest in the Berbers' own terms and perspectives, one has to wonder about the motivation behind this book. One thing is certain, centuries earlier, Ibn Khaldun had more sense and wisdom when he identified connections, continuity, and permanence among the peoples he called Berbers. And today, in the context of global movements of identity, Imazighen proclaim their diversity against essentialism. While they share a language (with numerous dialects) and their indigeneity, they are ethnically,

religiously, and culturally diverse. The strong bond of the Imazighen, through their difference, might bring us to reconsider our own divided world and the division we bring to others.

NOTES

[1] Jean Amrouche, *L'Éternel Jugurtha* (Paris: L'Arche, 1943), 1.

[2] Raymond Williams. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2011)

[3] For Galand, for instance, the Lybic language is an old state of today's Amazigh and is the most ancient language established in North Africa. Lionel Galand, "L'alphabet libyque de Dougga" *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 13-14 (1973), 361-368.

[4] Maya Shatzmiller, "Le mythe d'origine berbère (aspects historiques et sociaux)" *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 35 (1983), 148.

[5] Mary Louise Pratt, "Afterward: Indigeneity Today," in Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn, eds., *Indigenous Experience Today* (London: Routledge, 2007), 398.

[6] Karl, L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 44.

[7] See Haifaa Jawad, "Pan-Islamism and Pan-Arabism: Solution or Obstacle to Political Reconstruction in the Middle East?" in Haifaa Jawad, ed., *The Middle East in the New World Order* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

[8] "A pan-Arabist would see diversity as *fitna* (sedition)," Karim Mezran, professor of Middle Eastern studies, the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, quoted in Massoud Hayoun, "The coming Arab Identity Crisis," *The Atlantic*. March 8, 2012.

[9] Ulrike Freitag, "Writing Arab history: the search for the nation," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21:1 (1994), 19.

[10] The association between the Berbers and the French comes from the "Berber myth" the foundations of which are discussed at length in Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995).

[11] Omar Carlier, *Entre nation et Jihad: histoire sociale des radicalismes algériens* (Algiers: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1995), 328.

[12] Herodotus used the term Maxyes, but other variants of the name such as Mazyes or Mazices could be found in Greek and Latin sources.

[13] Today the term "indigenous" is also based on historical continuity, strong link to territories, distinct language, culture and beliefs.

[14] Kathleen J. Bragdon, "Indigenous Theory," in Hilary Callan and Simon Coleman, eds., *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, vol. 1-4 (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018).

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