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## Food and Identity in Japan

*Even nowadays a majority of Japanese people believe that from Yayoi to the Edo period the Japanese society was an agricultural society based on paddy fields and rice. For that reason rice played a great role in the Japanese construction of identity throughout the centuries. The ideology of rice and paddy fields is undoubtedly connected with the emperor and state. Beside that it is the base of everyday life through working, eating and festivals. In this way Japanese national, regional, linguistic and religious distinctions are marked in culinary fashion and eating habits.*

Key words: food, rice, identity, eating habits, Japan

### Introduction

Japan stands for four large islands and thousands of smaller ones. The volcanic and mountainous terrain boasts lush forests and heavy rainfall, much of it from monsoon; and the scarce farmland is used predominantly for rice. Beside rice, fish play a major dietary role, both fresh and preserved. In 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, the Yayoi, a migrating tribe that eventually settled in Japan, passed Korea, where rice growing techniques have already been developed, and transmitted them to the Japanese. Rice came to be used for numerous other purposes – beside eating it was used for paper, fuel, wine, building materials and animal feed, and thus became incorporated in every aspect of the Japanese society.

Our ideas about food represent ideas about ourselves, and we categorize people according to what we know about their culinary habits. Ethnic cuisines act as one of the most vivid ways through which group identities are recognized and reinforced (Caplan, 1997; Counihan, 1999). In many modern Western societies, for example, the ethnic distinctions that once gave society and food their shapes have increasingly broken down. A variety of social and cultural forces, many of them associated with modernization, have made the whole concept of ethnic identity difficult to define. While ethnicity has not lost its symbolic importance, the ethnic social networks that once provided the

basis for ethnic cuisine have been radically transformed (Mintz, 2002). As a result, according to some researchers, ethnic food traditions have begun to break down. People get most of their everyday recipes from cookbooks and magazines, not from their ancestors; insofar as they retain ethnic cuisines, they tend to use them primarily at holidays. At the same time, a dizzying array of ethnic foods has appeared in restaurants and supermarkets throughout the urban places, making once restricted cuisines available to anyone who wants them (Buckser, 1999).

This essay explores the characteristics of Japanese food and the impact of the changes brought by modernity on the meaning of food in Japan. Since the Meiji period the Japanese encounter serious difficulties in defining their identity due to a close engagement with the Western culture. Japan has imported many things from the West, including food. Dietary practice provides a common symbolic system through which the notions of Japanese identity can be expressed and interrelated.

## The role of food in identity processes

The world is becoming more unified and interconnected; the barriers between ethnic groups and nations are falling away and becoming obsolete. As modern institutions break down older social structures and networks, the affiliations that have historically rooted private conceptions of self lose much of their meaning (Kellner, 1992:141). The ways in which human beings relate to each other and to their social networks have changed fundamentally. Modernity has brought a revolution in the ways in which we conceive the world and societies. Smith (1995:1–5) observes that ethnic and national identities remain highly charged and sensitive political issues. Cohen (2000:150) argues that people construct the nation as the medium of their own experience, through the self. People identify with the nation, therefore national identity is a kind of personal identity. This does not exclude the proposition that they may also construct their selfhood to express what they perceive as components of their national identity<sup>1</sup>.

The concept of identity has been questioned on several grounds, i.e. gender, race, ethnicity and nationality. Ethnic and national identities are explicit collective identities. Probably they are the most complex ones, they are certainly connected to a great extent but they do not always coincide (Južnič, 1993:265). The argument here is concerning the “politics of location”, which maintains that these concepts do “make a difference” and that they also bring about important political implications. With the growth of individualism, identity is becoming more and more a matter of life-style.

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<sup>1</sup> Pre-modern identity can be generally understood as externally determined. In “tribal” societies it is kinship-ordered cosmologies that define identity in terms of deciding who someone is. In modernity, heteronymous definition of identity persists. Power of social control in this process of “subjectivization” passes from person to society through everyday life. There is also a post-modernistic awareness of identity choice; a person can choose his/her identity and experiment with it in the society. But these choices entail great risk (Lash, 1992: 4–7).

The concept of identity is closely related to other classic sociological concepts – i.e. the person and the self (Caplan, 1997:15).

Ethnic groups have changed in the modern West, but ethnicity has certainly not disappeared; indeed, the presence of ethnicity in public discourse has grown in recent decades (Smith, 1995). The very trends which have undermined ethnic communities have made the notion of ethnic identity, with its associations of primordiality and authenticity, increasingly appealing (Buckser, 1999). Yet in the absence of the old ethnic networks and enclaves, the specific nature of ethnic belongingness has become more difficult to establish. Questions about who is “really” a Jew, a German, a Japanese, a Native American, and so on have sparked bitter controversies from which no conclusive answers emerged.

Ethnicity rises from acknowledged differences and works through contrasts. Hence an ethnic cuisine is associated with a geographically and/or historically defined eating community. But ethnicity, like nationhood, is also “imagined” – and associated cuisines may be imagined, too. Once imagined, such cuisines provide added concreteness to the idea of national or ethnic identity. Ethnic foods offer a rich set of metaphors through which are such definitions expressed. While modernity may undermine ethnic food as a cohesive force within well-defined communities, it may open up a more intriguing role for it as a means for people to negotiate and make manifest their relationships with whatever forms of ethnic communities emerge in the late modern era (Ashley, 2004:81). The cultivation of a sense of ethnicity, which plays an important part in the creation of identity, is one mechanism by which people classify themselves in relation to other individuals and groups. A sense of a shared past, descent, language, beliefs and material culture are the ways in which this is done. Japan has “used” its past to counterfeit a sense of identity by means of archeological<sup>2</sup> and historical records, where food, specially rice played a big role. Because of that prevailing concepts of Japanese identity are grounded in the notion of a homogenous race and an autochthonous culture (Kaner, 1996:57).

However, some features of modernity place food in a particularly meaningful position. Identities become increasingly contingent and are based on uncertain and shifting personal ties rather than locations in well-defined social orders. In this context, consumption assumes a growing role in the individual’s self-definition, as consumers attempt to establish and express ideas about self through their choices of goods and foods (Lash, 1992). A shared system of cuisine helps to articulate identity, purpose, and politics. This tensile relationship – rather than a supposed universal concern with the question ‘Who am I?’ – is the generative element in multicultural temporalities. People do not necessarily seek identity; rather they seek secure ontological ground and have identity thrust upon them. The particular nature of food, moreover, makes it an especially ef-

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<sup>2</sup> Archeology can contribute to the understanding of some of the strands that comprise contemporary Japanese identity, but it is of vital importance that some other approaches and methods are taken into consideration as well.

fective symbol for expressing group memberships and relationships. While culturally constructed, food is consumed physically by individuals; thus eating always involves an individual choice about a certain connection with a certain group. In most cultures, moreover, many social activities revolve around food, placing the individual activity of consumption in a group context. Consequently, food becomes one of the most important symbolic media for expressing ideas of group and individual in societies where the relationship of group to individual is particularly problematic (Buckser, 1999).

The study of food and eating has a long history in anthropology, beginning in the nineteenth century (see Mennell, 1992). Since then, as the world that anthropologists chose to study became different, so has their work on food and eating. The study of food and eating is important both for its own sake – since food is utterly essential to human existence – and also because this subfield has proved valuable for debating and advancing anthropological theory and research methods. Food studies have illuminated broad societal processes such as political-economic value-creation, symbolic value-creation, and the social construction of memory (Buckser, 1999).<sup>3</sup>

For a long time food has been the subject of discussions of various sciences, which have been investigating it from medical, economical, food-industrial and chemical viewpoint. Comprehension of food as a cultural good is of a recent origin, prior to this conception the meaning of food was narrowed down for it was seen merely as a means of satisfying physical needs. Human being is incorporated in social net of surroundings in the choosing, using, preparing and eating the food (Godina-Golija, 1995:77). Like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart (Caplan, 1997:1–31). Eating together is the center of social relations. Foodways influence the shaping of community, personality, and family. The study of foodways contributes to the understanding of living-style across cultures and historical periods (Counihan, 1999:6).

Slavec Gradišnik (2000:483) has cited a Slovenian ethnologist Janez Bogataj, who has been studying a heritage of Slovenian cuisine: 'A culture of food has always been an excellent indicator of definite social, economical and spiritual extensions. Man is what he eats.' Study of food led directly to the consideration of the meanings ascribed to the

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<sup>3</sup> There are different kinds of research approaches to the study of food. The most prominent characteristic of the functional approach is a concern with how foodways expressed or symbolized a pattern of social relations. The seeking, preparation and receiving a food plays a part in the maintenance of social structures. The great virtue of the structuralist approach is that it clearly recognizes that "taste" is culturally shaped and socially controlled. But the structuralists like Lévi-Strauss, Douglas and others have always focused more on the aesthetic aspect of food and eating. Roland Barthes focuses particularly on the semiotics of food-advertising and cookery-writing and as a structuralist he has an influence on the sociology of food and eating. Attention to the past in the shaping of the present is one quality which makes Pierre Bourdieu an interstitial figure between the structuralist theorists and the later "developmentalists". People make individual choices, apparently according to their own preferences and also to their social background. Developmentalists like Harris, Goody, Mennell and Mintz do not deny the power of the symbolic meanings of food in shaping and controlling social behavior (Mennell, 1993:7–15).

feeding of the body. Feeding and eating are profoundly meaningful in all cultures. It is important to think about how cooking, eating and feeding – activities we so often take for granted – define our identities and relationships in our social life (Counihan, 1999: 2–3). A food is also a system of communication and because communication always implies a system of signification, we could say that entire “world” (social environment) is present in and signified by food. Substances of food, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification (Barthes, 1997:22–23).

## Dietary practice and identity in Japan

### The relationship with rice

It would not be an exaggeration if we said that the Japanese eat rice every day. Sharing a long and deep relationship with the Japanese, rice is by far the most important crop of all. Rich in carbohydrates and proteins, rice is considered as the staple of the Japanese diet. Ever since the cultivation of the first crop nearly 2000 years ago, the yearly cycle of sowing, seed transplanting, weeding, and harvesting is being repeated to the present day. It was believed that the forces of nature<sup>4</sup> affected rice crops, therefore various kinds of ceremonies were offered to the gods throughout the year.

Other than a source of good nutrition, rice played another important factor among the old Japanese. From ancient times until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, rice was used as a currency for paying taxes and wages. Like the rank of the feudal lords, which was measured by how much rice they had, rice was a ruler which indicated one’s economic status. But the real reason why the people of Japan treasure rice plants so much, lies in the fact that it transforms itself to numerous amount of products which are essential to people’s daily lives. *Mochi* known as rice cakes, *senbei* the rice cracker, and *miso* for adding flavor are all made out of white rice. Even the straw part of the rice plant was made useful; people have covered the roofs, made ropes and sandals and much more. To the Japanese, rice is not just any food. It formed the phase of the Japanese culture; the identity of Japan (Amino, 1996:235).

Even nowadays a majority of Japanese people believe that from Yayoi to the Edo period the Japanese society was an agricultural society based on paddy fields and rice, and if asked about “the ethnic identity of the Japanese” the first thing they think of is paddy fields and rice. They would see the emperor, who performs the rituals and ceremonies

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<sup>4</sup> From the snow-capped mountains of northern Hokkaido to the sandy shores of Okinawa, we can acknowledge distinctive differences in diet and cooking styles. Beside the fact of high mountains and oceans, which divide the country, there is a considerable difference in the availability of products within each region. Despite the differences, though, there lies a common ground. There it is possible to find plenty of fish and other marine products. With the climate perfect for growing good crops of rice, the Japanese diet consists of rice as the staple food, with fish and vegetables forming the nucleus of the side dishes.

to worship rice on the paddy fields, and who has been connected with the apex of the “Japanese state” for about 1300 years, as one of the unique features of Japanese society. Amino (1996:235–236) thinks, that this is a “false consciousness” or ideology, which has taken deep roots in the Japanese themselves and sharply constrained their behaviour. The proposition that the society has been an agricultural one from the ancient times to the present day has always been dubious. Consequently, the belief that the emperor – as one of the kings born into Japanese society – might be described as exclusively connected with paddy fields, is completely wrong.

Amino (1996:235) challenges the view of pre-industrial Japan as the nation of rice farmers, showing that fishermen and craftsmen constituted a much larger part of the population than previously recognized, and that their distinctive ways of life played a vital role in the dynamics of cultural change. As Hudson (1999:17) has pointed out, the Japanese would still be Japanese, even though they would do something else for living. Of course, the cultivation of rice and other viewpoints of Japanese culture had a profound influence on the ways Japanese people identify themselves and how other people see them.

## Influences of the state and religion

There are different cultural codes that are important for asserting national identity. One of them is food. Japanese view on ethnic identity is “primordialistic”, they see themselves to belong “naturally” to Japanese ethnic community and the state, in the same way that they belong to their families. As food is essential to life, was and continues to be power in a most basic, tangible and inescapable form. Food is a central concern in the politics of nation-states. Class, caste, race, and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through control over and access to food. Their distinctions are manifest through rules about eating and the ability to impose rules on others (Counihan, 1999: 8–9).

Allison (1997:296) provide an illuminating example of how lunch – and lunch boxes – can become a part of national identity. *Obentōs* are boxed lunches Japanese mothers make for their nursery school children. Following Japanese codes for food preparation – multiple courses that are aesthetically arranged – these lunches have cultural order and meaning. Using the *obentō* as a school ritual and chore the nursery school also endows the *obentō*<sup>5</sup> with ideological meanings. It is up to the mother to make the ideological operation entrusted to the *obentō* (by the state-linked institution of the nursery school), palatable and pleasant for her child, and appealing and pleasurable for her as a mother. Customarily these *obentōs* are highly crafted elaborations of food: a multitude

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<sup>5</sup> The food in *obentō* must be a “well-balanced” meal: Foods from the sea (*umi no sachi*) and land (*yama no sachi*), in a range of five colors, are to be prepared by different methods (some simmered, some broiled, a few fried, some pickled or tossed in sauces). More important, each student is required to eat everything his or her mother had packed into the child’s *obentō* box. Furthermore, the food needs to be cut and arranged so that it is possible to be eaten without making a mess, with chopsticks (Andoh, 2001).

of miniature portions, artistically designed and precisely arranged, in a container that is firm and cute. Allison (1997:297) has described how food is coded as a cultural and aesthetic apparatus in Japan, and to what extent the state holds its authority over schools in Japan, for which she used Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus to frame her argument.

Within this insistence on eating Japanese food reconfirm one as a member of the culture, are the principles by which Japanese food is customarily prepared: perfection, labor, small distinguishable parts, opposing segments, beauty, and the stamp of nature. Overarching all these more detailed coding are two that guide the making and ideological appropriation of the food: 1) there is an order to the food, and 2) taking the responsibility of producing food to the standards of perfection and exactness of Japanese cuisine. In these two rules is a message about social order and the role gender plays in sustaining and nourishing that order (Allison, 1997:300).

Another major influence on food is also religion. As a part of rice culture system, established in Japan, rice with *sake* (rice wine) was treated as a sacred grain for offering to the gods. The rituals connected with the paddy were the core of the festivals of the community that chose rice cultivation (Amino, 1996: 241). Manners and habits of eating are crucial to the very definitions of community, the relationship between people, interactions between humans and their gods, and communications between the living and the dead. Communal feasts involve a periodic reaffirmation of social groups. Sharing food ensures the survival of the group both in social and material sense. In many cultures, food is instrumental in maintaining good relations between humans and their gods. Food offerings connect the living and the dead, humans and their gods, neighbors and kin, and family members (Counihan, 1999:13–14).

Beside the rice from abroad a variety of foods was imported to Japan. During the development of Japan in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese contributed soy sauce, tea, chopsticks and imperial rule. Other influences arrived in Japan via Korea, including Buddhism, which, despite the pre-existing Shinto and Confucian religions, became the official religion in the 6th century. For the next 1200 years, meat was officially forbidden until the Meiji period, when the Japanese accepted Western cuisine, including meat. In the sixteenth century the Portuguese and the Dutch introduced to the Japanese fried foods like *tempura*. The traders also brought tobacco, sugar and corn. Around 1600 (and lasting until 1868), Japan's shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu feared that great wars would break out with Europe; for this reason he closed the ports and expunged the foreigners. During this period of isolationism, Japan's culture became even firmer in its roots. The main religions of Buddhism and Shinto emphasize the seasons and this came to be reflected in the foods served (Visočnik, 2003). In fact, it is because of Buddhism that meals feature five flavors and colors, respectively: sweet, spicy, salty, bitter and sour; and yellow, black, white, green, and red<sup>6</sup> (Shibata, 1988:23).

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<sup>6</sup> In Buddhism, all daily activities are forms of religious practice, therefore cooking and eating as well. The heart and the soul of Buddhist vegetarian cuisine is fully revealed in belief that person, time, place and food become one. Cooking must also accord with the seasons and occasions (Shibata, 1988:25).

US forced the Japanese to renew trade with the West in 1854, and soon a new Japanese ruling order took place. As Japan shed its feudal trappings and became a modern state, it imported Western technology, laws, and also food. The Japanese embraced Western food with some reservations. Long-standing pre-Meiji Buddhist taboos against meat-eating were brushed aside to a certain extent, but slabs of meat dripping with blood – steaks, for instance – remained revolting. Chopping the meat into small pieces made it somewhat less offensive. A better way was to hide the meat altogether beneath a sauce – a curry sauce, for instance (Takashi, 2000).

Before the World War II the food was very simple, specially among the working class. In the morning there was a pickled daikon radish (*takuan*), for lunch Japanese white radish (*daikon*) and potheb mustard (*mizuna*) was served, and for dinner they were eating leftovers from the lunch and pickled vegetables (*tsukemono*). There was also a lot of dried fish and fresh ones, like sardine and flying fish, specially in January. Every meal was also accompanied by green tea and rice. In the garden they had different kinds of vegetable, like *kabocha* (Japanese pumpkin) (Nishiyama, 1978: 23). The food was prepared in the kitchen, which was divided to the earthen floor (*doma*) and high ground (*yukaue*). Higher ground was made of wood and was the cleaner part of the kitchen, leading to the entrance of the room, where the eating was taking place. Chopping, washing, cooking and preparing the food was taking place in the *doma*, where also hearth and kitchen range (*kamado*) were situated (Kawamura, 2000:186).

The traditional Japanese breakfast differs fundamentally from the Western one. A traditional Japanese breakfast consists basically of rice and *miso* soup. Like many aspects of the Japanese life style, the breakfast culture has also been heavily Westernized in the last 150 years. Today Western and Japanese breakfast styles are more or less equally popular, with a large group of Japanese enjoying both styles. The most popular Western style items on the breakfast menu are bread, yogurt, fried or boiled eggs, jam and sausages or ham. Most popular Japanese style items are rice, *miso* soup and *natto*. As for beverages, most popular choices are milk, coffee, green tea and English tea (Andoh, 2001).

## Aesthetics and nature of food

Food systems (Counihan, 1999:7) are intimately related to the local environment, but in most cultures people define only certain products as edible and execrate many other potentially edible substances. In Japan the connection between nature and everyday living is very strong, therefore the Japanese are fully aware of the changes in the seasons. Japan's traditional culture is often described as the seasonal culture for so much revolves around the changing seasons and the sense of season highly valued. Since the utmost importance is attached to freshness and natural flavor, people love to eat ingredients at their *shun* or "now-in-season". Bamboo shoots, tuna, and herring of spring; bonito of early summer; *matsutake* (a type of mushroom) and chestnuts of the season of autumn. Eating the ingredients at their *shun* is believed to be good for one's health (Visočnik, 2003).



In the modern dining-kitchen area, we see a panorama of gadgets, appliances and tools. Ironically, nearly half of this unsightly clutter is devoted to making food appear more attractive; the remainder is meant to make food preparation more convenient (Andoh, 2001). This is because in Japan much attention is focused on the food, its significance being far beyond that of the merely pragmatic, functional one. The key element that has been acknowledged about Japanese food is its appearance. Food must be organized, arranged, stylized in order to be visually attractive. The visual appearance is equally important than its taste and the nutrition it provides to one's body. Presentational style of food is conditioned by a number of codes.<sup>7</sup> Visually, food substances are presented according to a structural principle not only of segmentation but also of opposition. Foods are cut to make contrasts of color, texture, and shape. It is also important in what ways food has been prepared to appear, in beauty and freshness, perfectly natural. It is this ability to appropriate "real" nature (a leaf on the tray) and to stamp the human reconstruction of nature that lends Japanese food its potential for cultural and ideological manipulation (Allison, 1997:299).

Before actually eating the food, you must enjoy it with the "eyes" first. Eyes are as large as the stomach. In Japan, food and dishes are considered to be a type of art. Although there are no marveling sessions held before the eating, the Japanese people really enjoy the artistic sense and beauty of the display and arrangement of the food and the choice of receptacles for serving it. More beautiful the food looks, more delicious it is thought to be. The aesthetic sense when it comes to serving food is a sense of season; a feeling for nature, and an eye for color, which must be skillfully incorporated.

## Conclusion

If we asked ourselves to think of one Japanese food, what comes to our mind? Probably *sushi*, raw fish, *tempura* or *tofu*. With Japanese restaurants and Sushi bars all over the world, Japanese food is no longer considered as one of the world's unsolved mysteries it once was. In fact, more and more people are recognizing Japanese food as one of the world's healthiest cuisines. With rice and abundant marine products at its mainstream, the traditional Japanese diet is impressively low in cholesterol, fat, and calories, and high in fiber. No wonder Japanese people have the highest longevity rate. Anyway, like all other cuisines, Japanese food is a product of the culture that produced it. And like culture food is changing through the time as well. Economic factors, plus the cachet of foreign foods, are revolutionizing the Japanese way of eating. The centrality of economics in food choice and the change in dietary patterns is the powerful symbol of food as an identity marker.

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<sup>7</sup> One code is for smallness, separation, and fragmentation. Portions are all cut to be bite-sized, served in small amounts on tiny individual dishes, and arranged on a table in an array of small, separate containers.

The changes in modernity have affected the nature and meaning of foods. Since commercial enterprises have increasingly taken over production, distribution, and preparation of food, its meaning to those who eat it has changed too. The ostensible variety of foods available has expanded. As a result, foods have become increasingly detached from their histories and places of origin. A choice of food reflects the personal preferences of the individual eater, not the norms or traditions of a local group. Just as modernity has disrupted local and ethnic identities, it has also disrupted the culinary patterns which once characterized them (Buckser, 1999). Food and ethnicity offer powerful metaphors for the construction of self for the increasingly uprooted modern individual with their associations of bodily incorporation. Ethnicity implies a blood tie, an authentic membership. Food provides a rich symbolic medium for expressing such identities. The act of eating involves a physical incorporation of a culturally constructed item; eating ethnic dishes emphasizes the purported physical reality of ethnic affiliation. Individuals have used ethnicity to the task of selfconstruction, choosing and defining ethnic identities to suit personal conceptions of self, and their use of ethnic foods has followed suit.

Throughout the modern world large numbers of people are confronted with the challenges of how to conceptualize ethnic identity and how to relate it to other identities. Food constitutes one of the most available and evocative media through which these issues can be expressed. At one level, food is just food in Japan, but under and through code of pragmatics Japanese cuisine carries other meanings that are – in Barth's terms – mythological (Alison, 1997). One of these is national identity: food being appropriated as a sign of culture. To be Japanese is to eat Japanese food – as so many Japanese confirm when they travel to other countries and find that the greatest problem they encounter abroad is the absence of “real” Japanese food. Rice is so symbolically central to Japanese culture (meals and *obentōs* often being assembled with rice as the core and all other dishes) that Japanese say they can never feel full until they have consumed their rice at least once during the day.

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