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## The Poetry of Common Sense: Proverbs as Advice

## THE POETRY OF COMMON SENSE:

### Proverbs as Advice

Cheri Micheau

#### Introduction

Ordinary people enjoy proverbs and find them useful as practical guides. They are a code in which the universal conscience has poured advice in poetic phrases and short formulas, easy to remember. Their unfailing wisdom throws light on doubt and gives courage in moments of indecision; their wit and humor catch by surprise and bring out a smile in moments of sadness; their penetrating and sure vision on human nature is instructive and, on the whole, encouraging and optimistic (Iscla Rovira 1984: 9).

The inventory of a society's proverbs, a genre which has varying functions, aesthetic esteem and norms for use from culture to culture, may serve as a description of that society's values. Manes (1983: 96) and Wolfson (1983: 80) describe compliments as reflecting the cultural assumptions of a society, while Abrahams (1968) describes all facets of folklore as defining society and societal interrelationships. Doob (1961: 266) , Albert (1972: 74), Firth (1926b: 245), and Evans-Pritchard (1964: 1) describe the store of proverbs of any one culture as a summary of accepted rules of conduct; that is, a cultural philosophy for that society. Christensen (1958: 232) and Firth (1926b: 246) stress that although proverbs validate cultural norms, they reflect only the norm, and that actual behavior may vary widely. As seen in Nyembezi's (1963: 43) attempt to characterize the Zulu moral

structure by their proverbs, there is a danger in generalizing too much from proverbs. Indeed, as pointed out by Winstedt (1950: 1), proverbs can be used to contradictory ends within one culture, depending on situation and interlocutors. Abrahams (1967: 183) adds that proverbs also provide insights into approved solutions to recurring social problems. Arnott (1957: 379) in describing the Fulani, Gambia (1957: 24) the Wolof and Albert (1972: 93) the Barundi, state that the talent to cleverly use proverbs, riddles and narratives is highly esteemed, indicating those societies' respect for a wide variety of art forms.

Proverbs provide a rich context for studying the natural environment, the "flora and fauna" of a culture, which are featured in the metaphors of proverbs (Hopgood 1948: 114; Winstedt 1950: 14). Interestingly, according to Winstedt (1950: 2), certain natural features and human experiences are described in the proverbs of nearly every culture, but in environment-specific ways. Proverbs, thus, provide insight into natural elements which hold symbolic value in a certain culture.

As Iscla Rovira (1984: 4), Nyembezi (1963: xi), Firth (1926: 134), and Taylor (1931: 2) explain, proverbs are born of experience. They are ordinary statements, originally used to describe a recurrent phenomenon in society, which were eventually adopted by the folk. Loeb (1952: 101) argues that cattle raisers originated the proverb as a "fund of primitive philosophy, ethics and law" and as an attempt to put abstract thoughts into words. Iscla Rovira (1984: 5) lists fables,

narratives, history, national epics, religious teachings and superstition as further sources of proverbs.

Proverbs are an art form traditionally transmitted by the oral and written channels. They have a long tradition in the native literature of nearly every culture, as well as in moral writings and teachings. In some African cultures proverbs can also be transmitted by way of public drumming, as described by Arewa and Dundes (1964: 80) for the Yoruba; in this culture, the successful drummer must learn not only a large repertoire of proverbs but also the appropriate occasions for their use.

Proverbs are characterized as brief and pregnant in meaning (Firth 1926a: 136); they are often stated in a metaphorical form embodying "the wisdom of many and the wit of one" (Lord Russell as cited in Taylor 1967). According to Seitel (1972: 6) proverbs are appropriate in many and varying contexts for nearly all speakers; specific norms for use and the effects of such factors as status and age, however, are widely disparate from culture to culture. Proverbs are indirect, enjoying wide variation of interpretation and wide applicability. As Evans-Pritchard (1963: 4) writes, Zande proverbs are variable both in form and meaning, this variation in meaning being the sign of a good proverb. By virtue of their being expressed in objective terms, they influence without forcing (Abrahams 1968: 48); their objectivity carries more weight than an emotional outburst (Firth 1926a: 137). Their metrical form ensures that they will be remembered longer by the addressee (Nyembezi 1963: 24).

Taylor (1931: 5-15) defines two types of proverbs: the bare assertion or proverbial apothegm which lacks metaphor but has been adopted through repetition (for example, "Haste makes waste"). The meaning of such a proverb derives from implication and may be "era-specific", while the second type, metaphorical proverbs, presents a timeless incongruity or relation which captures the imagination (for example, "Don't count your chickens before they're hatched").

The functions of proverbs vary by culture. Christensen (1958: 233) and Messenger (1959: 64) characterize the use of proverbs by litigants and spokesmen for the chief to cite precedents during judicial proceedings among the Fante and Anang, while Eugenio (1975: 1) writes that clan feuds are often settled by the use of proverbs in the Philippines. Christensen (1958: 239) adds that proverb recitation contests among the Fante are a form of entertainment. Messenger (1959: 64) and Westermarck (1930: 54) add that proverbs "spice up" ordinary conversation. Among the Haya of Tanzania, according to Seitel (1972: 59), the proverb is a part of friendly, idle conversation, where it serves to entertain and as a rhetorical device in arguments.

Westermarck (1930: 51) describes Moroccan proverbs and Heath (1983: 144) proverbs in an American community as reflecting deeply religious backgrounds, while little mention is made of religion's playing a part in proverbs among sub-Saharan African peoples (except among the Anang--Messenger 1959: 64); few Zulu proverbs refer directly to religion (Nyembezi 1963: 41). This "crystallized wisdom" (Firth 1926b: 264), whether directly religious or not, is meant to be passed

on, to form a society's ethical tradition; sometimes the metaphorical context of the proverb changes, when passed to the modern generation, in order to keep pace with a changing society (Westermarck 1930: 54).

Another function of proverbs is to signal in-group membership and to stress shared identifications (Abrahams 1968: 59). According to Norrick (1985: 26), when a speaker uses a proverb he "quotes his own linguistic community" and communicates his desire for belonging in his culture. Traditional proverbs ensure smooth social interaction by invoking values shared by the group; they name recurrent anxiety situations, in which the social stability of a group is threatened from within (Abrahams 1968: 47), and offer solutions proven to be effective through experience.

Proverbs, by virtue of the fact that they are indirect and exert a distancing effect on the addressee, might be considered a strategy of negative politeness. This strategy to preserve the addressee's "face" may be used in socially uncomfortable situations (Brown 1980: 116) or to avoid conflict when giving directives or sanctions (Abrahams 1968: 48). Proverbs may be compared to the verbal formulas used to avoid direct confrontation in the Malagasy community described by Keenan (1974: 127). Interestingly, Moorish proverbs are used in refusals to avoid the curse of the evil eye (Westermarck 1930: 61). Norrick (1985: 277) states that proverbs can be described as non-confrontational because they are doubly indirect: first, since they are not original, the speaker is not responsible for the message; and second, the addressee must interpret the message himself, thus putting some of the

blame for a confrontation on the addressee.

The major function of proverbs in every culture seems to be didactic in nature. The act of giving advice, at least in this study, falls into that category. Arewa and Dundes (1964: 70) describe parental directives in Yoruba and state that the proverb removes the parent from the imperative and universalizes the message. Eugenio (1975: 8-9) explains that the preponderance of ethical proverbs in the Philippines is due to their function as a tool of instruction, while for Nyembezi (1963: 41, in describing the Zulu), Messenger (1959: 64, the Anang), Christensen (1958: 235, the Fante) and Firth (1926a: 137, the Maori), a chief function of proverbs is to instruct younger generations and to remind adult clan members of socially desirable behavior.

Finally, Heath (1983: 144) relates the teaching of language to children in an American community through "rigidly prescribed oral formulas" such as proverbs to possible reduced creativity and divergent thinking as well as slow cognitive development--the "restricted code" theory described by Bernstein (1972 [1970]: 170-171). She describes the use of a proverb or even part of a proverb originally associated with a child's favorite fable or Bible story as a parental strategy for reminding the child of the required behavior by association.

Various proverb researchers (Abrahams 1967: 182; Coulmas 1981: 70; DeCaro and McNeil 1970: 5-6; Arewa and Dundes 1964: 71; and Firth 1926b: 246) demand that proverbs be collected with their meaningful



social context. As Hymes writes: "The significance of features of language cannot be assessed without knowledge of their social matrix" (1972a: 5). These researchers agree that that social context includes: the folk definition of what constitutes a proverb; the reasons and the situations for their use; and the personal interpretation of the metaphors contained in the proverbs. They state that the understanding of the meaning of a proverb, even within a speech community, cannot be assumed. Such elements as settings, participants, norms, channels, topics relationships, absence or presence of participants and appropriateness of use are significant additional factors in any study of proverbs (Arewa & Dundes 1964: 71). It is suggested by these two researchers that if the opportunity does not exist for the collection of proverbs in natural settings where an ethnography of speaking folklore could be developed, that participants be asked to recall situations for the use of individual proverbs (Arewa & Dundes 1964: 72). Such recall data were used in the present study.

Much has been written in criticism of the direct translation of proverbs found in foreign settings. The translation of a foreign-language proverb into an approximation of the proverb in the second language or into a proverb with a similar meaning in the native language does not take cultural differences into consideration. As Clyne (1985: 17) writes of culture-bound material, communication breakdown results when the addressee attempts to fit the speaker's message, in this case proverbs, into his own cultural schema. Proverbs are, therefore, not directly translatable, possibly even from one

community to another within the same linguistic group. As will be seen, the social context (the family), the relationship (parent and child), the time (Depression era) and the setting (small town) combined to influence not only the parents' selection of certain proverbs for advising and teaching, as described in the present study, but also the subjects' interpretation of these proverbs.

#### Purposes of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the giving of advice in the form of proverbs or original (adapted or familial) wise sayings by parents to children in the first half of this century; to collect actual examples of these proverbs with the context in which they were used; and to relate the messages communicated in these pieces of advice to values prevalent during that time.

Research questions addressed in this study were:

1. Were proverbs used frequently by parents to give advice earlier in this century? Why was advice precoded, or what special effect did it have?
2. Which parent used proverbs more often to give advice, and what is the significance of that parent's preference for proverbs?
3. In which context or about what topics were proverbs used to give advice? What cultural values do these proverbs reflect?
4. Have these proverbs been passed down to the participants' own children and grandchildren? Why or why not?

Method

Recall data from the participants' childhoods were the basis for this analysis. Participants were interviewed in ten- to twenty- minute sessions which were audiotaped and later transcribed. Six questions were asked:

1. Was it common in your family for your parents to give you advice by using proverbs (or proverb-like phrases that were not necessarily proverbs but which were often repeated in the same or similar form)?
2. Can you give examples of these formulas for giving advice from your childhood? (For each example, please specify if it was your mother or your father who used this.)
3. With what topics did these pieces of advice deal?
4. Why, in your opinion, did family members use such "proverbs"? (What effect did this type of advice have in comparison with "original" advice?)
5. Where did your parents learn these proverbs?
6. Have you used these same proverbs to give advice to your children? Why or why not?

The researcher attempted to give only the necessary explanation of procedure during the interview. The tape recorder was turned off at times during several sessions at the informant's request to give "think time".

Fond memories of childhood are a popular topic of conversation, especially among the elderly. When informants were encouraged to supply as much information as possible, some added not only complete contexts for the uses of advice in proverbial form, but also descriptions of family life in rural and small-town Pennsylvania

between the World Wars. Wolfson (1976: 197) points out that solidarity affects the verbal behavior in an interview situation. Since some informants perceived this interview as a social visit in many cases, they attempted to be as helpful and informative as possible. Biographical details were not directly elicited; they were either volunteered by the participants in the course of the interview or, since many were relatives and friends of the researcher, this information was already known.

#### Participants

Twenty-four residents of a small, northwestern Pennsylvania town (population: 5,000) participated in this project. Fourteen of these residents, whose ages range from fifty-five to seventy-five, have lived all their lives in this town, while the remaining were raised in rural areas or small towns elsewhere in Pennsylvania; all participants have lived their adult lives in this small town. Their conservative, traditional backgrounds and the fact that all of the informants were born or grew up during the Depression and/or were raised by parents who were deeply affected by this period seem significant for this study of proverbs and the values they represent. Fourteen members of the group of sixteen women and eight men who participated in the study described their backgrounds as working-class. All but nine come from families of five children or more, while five are from one- or two-child families. Only three informants had one college-educated parent; in addition, nine had had at least one parent at home who was not a native speaker of English, and five had had two parents who did not regularly speak

English at home. Some of the proverbs supplied during the interviews were quoted in Swedish, German or Serbo-Croatian, then the context and significance were explained. Of the twenty-four, fifteen became professionals in their adult lives--nurses, teachers, school administrators, and engineers; four chose white-collar and two blue-collar jobs; and three were housewives. Nine participants are now retired. All but two have children; all but four have grandchildren.

#### Definitions and Problems

It was not deemed necessary before the interview to define the concept of "advice". Some informants seemed to define it more from the standpoint of disapproval or disciplinary measures: warnings, admonishments, or reminders, applied usually before or during the infraction of a parental rule--a type of "preventive medicine" to keep the children out of trouble. D'Amico-Reisner (1983: 114) writes that context and relationship combine to determine the form of the disapproval exchange. Others named proverbs which communicated general moral values which could influence one's adult life.

The concept of "proverb" was also not defined before the interview, but informants seemed to know the characteristics of a proverb, occasionally stopping to correct themselves after supplying an idiom or a humorous saying and defining those as "slang" or "local usage".

Since the residents of this town are not accustomed to having student researchers in their midst, the entire atmosphere of the

interview for some was strained. Informants expressed fear of the tape recorder, worry about their lack of background in the area of study, and a failing memory; yet, no one refused to try.

#### Results and Discussion

Of the twenty-four participants five claimed that their parents had not used proverbs to give advice. All five were from small families, and, as several claimed, their parents took the time to explain to them or to use "child psychology"; another claimed that the rules of the home were implicit and did not need to be constantly repeated. No claims can be made from such a small sample about the relationship between family size and proverb use.

Two other informants claimed that the use of proverbs had been very common in their homes, but could remember neither the context nor examples of these. Of the remaining seventeen, eleven participants claimed that proverbs were prevalent, and six said that proverbs were used, though infrequently, to give advice. Twelve stressed that their mothers had always been the "advice-givers" in the family, that their mothers were the disciplinarians, and that their fathers had had little say in child rearing. This is a function of the fact that women were the principal care-givers, and few women worked outside the home. In cases where the children were raised by relatives, it was the female care-giver who used proverbs for advice giving. Women's use of proverbs as an indirect method of advising and commanding may be related to the power distribution in the family as described by Albert

(1972: 99), who writes that women often influence and persuade in family matters rather than directly ordering.

In giving examples in response to Question 2 (examples of proverbs used to give advice), several stressed that these proverbs reflected the moral code of their time. It was surprising that the informants remembered proverbs which accurately symbolize personal values which now seem to guide their adult lives--values which would be named by neighbors or friends as basic to their moral character. The question remains: did these proverbs influence the outcome of their moral training, for example, did proverbs about thrift help them to become thrifty, or do they remember a particular proverb because it reflects qualities they now value?

Most informants named only one or two proverbs, and these have been grouped by the cultural value the parent intended to emphasize.

1. Honesty/good reputation

Parents were concerned that the children build a solid reputation for honesty, and that they not soil their good name (or the name of their parents) by actions which, in such a small town, would soon be known to all. Proverbs also discouraged the children from associating with disreputable citizens. In the town during these difficult years poverty, alcoholism, and illiteracy were facts of life, and temptation abounded.

Proverbs which reflected this theme were:

- a. Honesty is the best policy: Two informants recalled being forced to return items that they had "lifted " from local stores.
- b. You can catch a thief, but you can never catch a liar: Used by one informant's mother when the child was caught "red-handed" but refused to admit her mistake.
- c. Birds of a feather flock together; You are known by the company you keep; One rotten apple will spoil the whole bunch were used to advise children in selecting appropriate friends or dates.
- d. Remember who you are or Whatever you have in this town, it's your reputation that counts expressed the concern with soiling a good name. Informants stressed that the mothers of twelve or thirteen children felt a great burden to keep the family name clean. The second was not an actual proverb, rather a paraphrase, but the participant felt that this was a type of family proverb which guided her family. A third proverb, Do things to get your name known, was more active advice--undertake activities to bring yourself into the spotlight.

## 2. Industry/thoroughness

In the informants' large families, cooperation in work was a necessity. Nearly every informant recalled some proverb that encouraged the children to pitch in and help at home or to work hard at an after-school job or in school, in order not to let their parents down. These proverbs are realized today in neighbors with reputations for industry and dependability. In such cultures as the Swedish and the German, represented in this sample, hard work is glorified.

The following proverbs reflect these values:

- a. To whom much is given, much is required--One informant was answered with this proverb when she asked to be rewarded for receiving good grades. As a teacher, this philosophy was reflected in the intellectual challenge she offered to



each of her English students.

- b. Tomorrow, not today, say all lazy people (translated from German); Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today; A stitch in time saves nine; Procrastination had no place in homes where everyone's help was needed to keep the family "above water". On the other hand, one informant was advised Don't start too many things at one time to encourage temperance in work.
- c. Whatever's worth doing at all is worth doing well; Haste makes waste; Lazy man's load; A lazy seamstress uses a long thread were admonishments to encourage quality work done thoroughly without cutting corners, whether in sewing, cooking or in a job.
- d. Many hands make light work may have had several ends. While exhorting the benefits of cooperation in completing a task, it served also as a directive to get busy.
- e. You have to have a goal: Described as a family proverb, this emphasized to one informant the helpfulness of looking to the completion of a project or a school year and being motivated by the desired goal.
- f. Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise: This was a popular proverb, especially among those brought up in rural areas. One informant recalls being bothered by this proverb, realizing early on that this was a ruse to get her to go to bed without argument.

### 3. Patience/endurance

Parents, themselves having difficulty with the economic situation, probably regretted being able to give their children so little. These pieces of advice may have eased the unavoidable guilty conscience:

- a. Anything worth having is worth waiting for: Described as being used when the child could not wait to receive a material possession or for something to happen.
- b. The grass always seems greener across the way was probably often used during the Depression in this town where there were great differences in economic standing among the self-employed, the unemployed, farmers, and professionals.

4. Interpersonal relationships/fairness

The democratic idea of a "fair trial" was the basis for this reminder to judge slowly and fairly:

- a. Consider the source; There are two sides to every question; Every fox smells his own hole: These proverbs, all named by the daughter of a lawyer, indicate the attempt by parents to encourage fairness while discouraging gossip, unfortunately a common phenomenon in small towns.
- b. Do unto others, and you'll get it back, though maybe not to you: This is obviously an adaptation of the Golden Rule, but with an interesting twist. The reward for a good deed may fall on others who need it more. This informant was from a Yugoslavian background, which could explain the variation from the traditional proverb.
- c. All good things come in small packages; Don't judge a book by its cover: These proverbs discouraged the child from rating quality by size or appearance. (These were provided by a very petite woman who may have suffered teasing about being small as a child. Thus, the proverb provided wisdom and comfort.)

5. Thrift/caution

As can be imagined, thrift and caution were not just "nice" values to teach but survival techniques during the Depression era. Informants claimed that their parents' ethnic backgrounds--Swedish, German, Yugoslavian, English, Scottish, and Irish-- also influenced their emphasis on thrift. Such proverbs as A penny saved is a penny earned; Don't burn the candle at both ends; and A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush reflect this philosophy of caution, of not overstepping one's financial bounds or the limits of one's energy.

6. Discipline/raising children

Five informants considered the following a proverb without reservation: If you get a spanking in school, you'll get another at home and explained that parents used this almost daily to ensure stellar behavior in school and to emphasize the teacher's unquestioned power. Although this lacks some of the poetic or metaphorical qualities of other proverbs, it seems an interesting reflection of parent-teacher cooperation. Other proverbs stressed the important job of parenting, and, as some explained, these pieces of advice were intended to be passed down to the next generation of parents: Spare the rod—spoil the child or a Biblical proverb:

Train up a child in the way it should go, And when he is old he will not depart from you.

Both implied that children welcome direction. One informant who could remember very few proverbs from home remembers her mother's repeating the phrase Learn by doing which reflects the idea of giving little advice but setting a positive example. Another remembered that his mother often exhorted: "Do as I say, not as I do" to account for the occasional bad example.

7. Self-reliance/facing up to mistakes

The following three proverbs reflect the emphasis by some parents in that period on individualism, self-reliance and paying the consequences for one's own mistakes: Be sure your sins will find you out (used by a strict Baptist mother); You made your bed, now lie in

it, and Listen to a different drummer (Thoreau). The last is the only quote from a literary source other than the Bible. The informant who named this piece of advice claimed that it influenced the way she would lead her difficult but rewarding life. Finally, in facing adversity, one informant's father often philosophized: There's something funny in everything, an optimism which this informant has certainly incorporated into his philosophy of life.

In answering the question about what topics or situations elicited these proverbs, most claimed that they were often used before the children went off to school, out with friends or on a date; when the parents (or the mother) wanted all chores to be finished; when discussing small mistakes the child had made; or just reminding the child by using these proverbs of a personal weakness on which s/he needed to improve. Rather than giving advice on specific problems or questions, proverbs were used instead, as can be expected, to handle the recurring moral dilemmas of childhood.

In explaining why proverbs were used, the answers varied widely. Some felt they served in large, busy families to save time, since they were "short and to the point"; that they might have come to mind faster when the situations became difficult or a problem had to be handled; that they served to mask a command which might not have been so willingly accepted; and as an attention getter. Some informants claimed that their parents used only the first few words of the proverb to allude to the desired behavior before the children strayed too far, in order to "put them back on the right track". A proverb associated

with a story could also remind the child of the consequences of a wrong action without spelling these out each time, i.e. threat by association. It was hoped, explained one participant, that these proverbs would come to the child's mind when he was away from his parents and would act as a "conscience" to guide behavior—that the proverbs would be "ingrained" in the children-- and that these would be passed on to their children. In proverbs a parent hoped to pass on his or her religious and moral ideals. Another explained that a proverb justified the parent's words, proving to the child that others had used the same defense--"If it was good enough for them, it was good enough for me". A school administrator explained that the people of his parents' generation were common folk, many immigrants, many functionally illiterate and therefore without the scope of vocabulary and experience needed to give advice in a more elaborated form; these people "lived by mottoes which served as guideposts for living". Another informant explained that her father chose proverbs to reach her, a rebellious child turned off to parental guidance but turned on to poetry; the poetry of proverbs impressed her as a child, and since they were impersonal, she could answer back without feeling that she was attacking her father. These purposes are amazingly similar to those posited by the experts cited in the introduction.

The sources of proverbs used by their parents, assumed more than known, were ancestors, school, Old World traditions, literature and religion, while others described proverbs as the products of their parents' own experiences and mistakes.

Finally, when asked if they had used proverbs in raising their own children, ten answered affirmatively. Nine of these are women. However, some of these ten and those who answered no commented that these proverbs had little effect on their own children; that the children rejected these adages; that children today would not understand these proverbs; and that they would be ridiculed by their children if they attempted to use proverbs for giving advice. Those who felt they are still effective cited reasons similar to those above: proverbs are used even today to be brief or indirect, and to invoke a moral tradition, as well as to be consistent.

#### Conclusion

The consideration of proverbs from a sociolinguistic standpoint suggests questions for further research: How do such factors as family background, educational level, role, sex, socio-economic status, family power relationships and the quality of the parent-child relationship affect the use of proverbs for advice-giving? In what other settings are proverbs used to give advice? Have proverbs indeed died out as a tradition within the modern family, and if so, why?

The proverbs named by the informants in this project seem to accurately reflect the moral code of their time. Is this code now perhaps outmoded and in need of alteration in this era of "getting ahead at any cost" and "climbing up the corporate ladder", or are these values timeless and universal? It was interesting to note that the elderly informants in this survey showed by the fact that they often

gave only the first several words of the proverb that they assumed a shared cultural knowledge with the interviewer, an assumption which could prove wrong with a younger interviewer. What proverbs would fit the social and moral climate of the 1980's?

Although I do not claim that my own experience is typical of my generation's, I can, nevertheless, attest to the relevance of some of the proverbs cited in this study to dilemmas I have faced in the 1980's. These proverbs, which served in my home as advice as I grew up in the 1950's and 1960's, encourage industry and working to the limits of one's ability, while discouraging procrastination. Such messages do, indeed, still come to mind when a difficult decision must be made or a clever rationalization devised; it is hard to imagine that such advice could ever become outmoded.

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