The Classical Arabic *Maqāma* in Yorubaland, Nigeria

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The Classical Arabic *Maqāma* in Yorubaland, Nigeria

Texts, Contexts, and Scholars

By

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Cover illustration: A *maqāma* teaching session inside a mosque in Ibadan Nigeria, 2018.

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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

To Abẹni, and to Abdullah, Ayman, A'isha, Asmaa', Abdul-Hayy, and Abdul-Wadud

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Content

Foreword

When the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122) appeared on the scene over nine centuries ago, the text became an instant classic. This collection of stories (*maqāma*s) about the eloquent rogue Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī was first read aloud to a group of prominent scholars in Baghdad in the early 6th/12th century. It then spread rapidly to al-Andalus, Central Asia, and beyond. For centuries, al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* was a central feature of Islamic education, attracting dozens of commentaries and scores of adaptations. Its remarkable success across centuries has been obscured by the rapid decline in its reputation over the course of the 13th/19th century, when al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* became, for many, a symbol of literary decadence and cultural decline. As put by Charles Pellat, a 20th-century French Orientalist, the reasons for the *Maqāmāt*'s extraordinary success "are somewhat difficult to understand and must be accounted for by the decline of literary taste."[1] Both Arab reformers and Orientalists heavily criticized al-Ḥarīrī for what they considered its overly ornate rhyming prose and its emphasis on form over content. In the past century, scholars of Arabic literature have found al-Ḥarīrī's predecessor al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008) more appealing to read, study, and translate. This preference is partly because the earlier collection is perceived as more focused on narrative content and less concerned with linguistic fireworks like palindromes and double entendres.

However, al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* did not fall out of favor in all corners of the Islamic world. In this book, Dr. Sulaiman Adewale Alagunfon shows that the text continues to thrive in Nigeria today. For many Muslim scholars in Yorubaland, the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī is a central text in an Arabic and Islamic education. As Dr. Alagunfon's study of Yorubaland scholarly culture demonstrates, al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* continues to be celebrated and taught intensively in the more traditional venues of Arabic education. Because the *maqāma* genre holds such prestige, members of Yorubaland's Muslim scholarly elite have begun composing new *maqāma* collections in recent decades, an important development in the long history of the *maqāma* genre that Dr. Alagunfon's monograph brings to our attention. For these authors, the *maqāma* is not considered an old fashioned or obsolete genre. Rather, al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* and the *maqāma* genre more broadly speak to the concerns of the present, including the paramount

1 Margoliouth, D.S. and Pellat, Ch., "al-Ḥarīrī", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, online version. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Accessed on March 2, 2024 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2733.

importance of Arabic as a language of Islamic scholarship. As one of Dr. Alagunfon's interlocutors states, those who have not mastered the *maqāma* cannot truly claim to be scholars of Arabic. In Yorubaland, dedicating a lifetime to the study of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* as a student, scholar, and teacher is a marker of scholarly prestige. As was the case for centuries across the Islamic world, authoring *maqāma*s has now become a way for Yorubaland scholars to participate in the *maqāma* tradition.

Having read Dr. Alagunfon's study and some of the Nigerian *maqāma*s that he has analyzed, I felt it might be pertinent in this foreword to address some of the methodological questions that his important study brings to mind, particularly for those who are interested in Arabic literature and Islamic studies. For some contemporary scholars of Arabic literature, it is counterintuitive that al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* flourished in Islamic contexts, given how subversive the text appears. After all, al-Ḥarīrī's rogue deploys his erudition and eloquence to dupe his audiences. In the very first of al-Ḥarīrī's *maqāma*s, Abū Zayd holds a pious sermon urging his audience to asceticism; however, the narrator later discovers that the preacher is a hypocrite who feasts and drinks away from watchful eyes. In another *maqāma*, Abū Zayd issues a series of seemingly incorrect *fatwā*s, which only make sense when you recognize the use of double entendre. Confronted with these parodic deployments of piety, modern scholars have often assumed that al-Ḥarīrī's work was subversive to Muslim sensibilities, representing a kind of "carnivalesque" mockery of Islamic scholarship that serious Muslim scholars must have found abhorrent. What these interpretations fail to consider is the vibrant Islamic reception of the text over the course of centuries, a reception that continues into the present in some circles.

What are we to make of this apparent tension between the playfully parodic content of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* and its celebrated status as a quintessentially Islamic text? The simple answer is that this apparent tension is based on the mistaken assumption that Muslim sensibilities are inherently opposed to irony, parody, and play. One of the major themes of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* is that language has the potential to both conceal and reveal, depending on the capacities of the reader. Excellent readers can look beyond the obvious meaning of the text and derive pleasure in uncovering its hidden layers. This level of complexity is one of the features that led the 6th/12th-century commentator al-Muṭarrizī (d. 610/1213) to claim that al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* was marked by inimitability (*iʿjāz*), a term that is often thought to be reserved for the Qur'ān's miraculous inimitability. As Dr. Alagunfon points out in his study, Yorubaland scholars continue to describe the *Maqāmāt* as inimitable, and some go so far as to identify al-Ḥarīrī as "the Prophet of language (*nabī al-lugha*)."

I believe this deep connection between the *Maqāmāt* and the sacred through language is not as surprising or counterintuitive as it may initially seem. The Qur'ān itself is a complex, deeply allusive, and sometimes difficult text that challenges the reader to undertake the potentially arduous task of exegesis. For many interpreters, the Qur'ān is "a sea without a shore," and the reader must remain constantly aware that the language may have multiple meanings. Similarly, in al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*, only the elite interpreters are able to see beyond the surface level of Abū Zayd's performances. In the *maqāma* mentioned above that contains a litany of *fatwā*s with double meanings, the fictional audience is left with the incorrect, surface-level interpretations. However, the narrator distinguishes himself as a skilled interpreter by uncovering their hidden meanings. These hermeneutical narratives dramatize the process of interpretation that might be undertaken by careful readers of sacred texts. Al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* also warns that the discipline of reading carefully can be undermined by desire and delight. In some *maqāma*s, an onlooker is distracted by a speaker's physical beauty, and in others, it is the licit magic of Abū Zayd's eloquent speech that mesmerizes the audience. Reading and interpreting texts, whether scriptural or not, requires both a deep knowledge of Arabic and a temperament that is not distracted by dazzling figures and performances.

As Dr. Alagunfon shows, Abū Zayd's reputation and influence is not limited to the scholarly sphere. For instance, the word *saruji* in Yoruba refers to a crafty and witty person. This term is used because the person is likened to Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī. Dr. Alagunfon also demonstrates that one of the trickster's performances in al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* has been incorporated into Yorubaland prayer books in Arabic. In other words, a fictional rogue's prayer of the 6th/12th century has become part of the quotidian language and Islamic culture of Yorubaland. To tell the whole story, we must turn to *maqāma* #12 of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*, in which the rogue Abū Zayd encounters the narrator and his companions as they search for some armed protection for their caravan journey. Abū Zayd is dressed in the guise of a monk (*labūsuhu labūs al-ruhbān*) and offers to sell the narrator and his companions a prayer as protection. Mere language is not an armed escort, but Abū Zayd assuages their doubts by promising to travel with them. The monkish man fully trusts the power of his prayer and, as a result, the narrator and his company also place their trust in it. When they arrive safely, he disappears, only to be found later by the narrator in a tavern, which sparks the narrator's righteous indignation. The narrator swears never to enter a tavern or a wine shop again and departs, saying "we left those two sheikhs, Abū Zayd and Iblīs, to themselves."[2] It is Abū Zayd's prayer in this *maqāma*, discussed in Dr.

2 al-Ḥarīrī, *Maqāmāt Abī Zayd al-Sarūjī*, ed. Michael Cooperson (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 55.

Alagunfon's study and detailed in his appendices, that has come to be considered both efficacious and worthy of imitation.

The Ḥarīrian *maqāma* from which the prayer derives seems to be a loose adaptation of a *maqāma* by al-Hamadhānī, in which the narrator finds himself on a ship being tossed about by a storm, causing him and the other passengers to weep and wail. One man, whom we find out later is the rogue Abū al-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī, appears to be unmoved by the terrors of the storm. He explains that he is fearless because he possesses an amulet that protects a person from drowning. He then offers to provide each passenger a similar amulet in exchange for one dinar now and another upon their safe arrival. Before the narrator gives the man the second payment, he demands an explanation, to which the rogue replies in verse, "Were I drowned today/I would not be bothered for an explanation."[3] Al-Hamadhānī's trickster implies that this amulet offers no real protection to the traveler. If the amulet fails its possessor, the purveyor of amulets is long gone and, in this case, already dead. Al-Ḥarīrī's prayer of protection, by contrast, is articulated by a man who pretends to be an ascetic but is ultimately revealed to be drunk and a fraud. Unlike the amulet in al-Hamadhānī, however, the efficacy of Abū Zayd's prayer is not directly called into question. Is it the fact that al-Ḥarīrī's narrative does not undermine the prayer's efficacy that allows the prayer itself to be extracted and put to use as a prayer for protection? Or is it altogether the wrong question to ask how pieces of discourse, such as Abū Zayd's prayer, move through the world? When in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we witness the pompous and duplicitous Polonius giving his son Laertes advice on how to live, he utters one of the most frequently quoted words of wisdom from the bard: "To thine own self be true." It is not bad advice, per se, when it is taken out of a narrative context that makes it seem hollow and ridiculous. A particular poem, turn of phrase, or piece of wisdom might serve one purpose within the narrative of a text and a completely different purpose when it stands alone.

The use of Abū Zayd's prayer for protection in pious contexts, that is, *as prayers*, suggests that the line between the "literary" and the "pious" is blurrier than is often admitted in the modern study of Arabic literature. When classifying works of narrative as "literary" works, it seems that the unstated and even sublimated assumption is that the literary is necessarily secular. The modern study of Arabic literature and its institutional formations are haunted by these kinds of secularizing assumptions. It is sometimes taken for granted,

3 al-Hamadhānī, *Maqāmāt Abī al-Faḍl Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī*, ed. Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (Istanbul: Maṭbaʿat al-Jawāʾib, 1881), 6.

for example, that certain *maqāma* collections lie outside the bounds of the Hamadhānian-Ḥarīrian genre because they are fundamentally "serious" and "pious" rather than playful, fictitious, and therefore literary.[4]

The blurring of this ostensible boundary can also be seen in the authorial introduction to one of the Yorubaland *maqāma* collections discussed in Dr. Alagunfon's book, in which the author Ṣāhib al-Qurʾān al-Ilūrī (b. 1973) provides a list of previous *maqāma* collections that have served as models for him. Al-Ilūrī's genealogy of the *Maqāmāt* differs in significant ways from the standard genealogy of the *maqāma* in the Euro-American study of the genre, such as it is. The landmark texts for this Yorubaland author are, to say the least, unexpected. Although al-Ilūrī begins, as we might expect, with al-Ḥarīrī and al-Hamadhānī, he also includes the *Maqāmāt* of the Muʿtazilī exegete al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), a collection that consists of exhortations to al-Zamakhsharī's own soul.[5] As the Finnish scholar of the *maqāma* Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila puts it, al-Zamakhsharī's *maqāma*s "are only marginally part of the genre originated by al-Hamadhānī," but he adds that al-Zamakhsharī's exhortations are quite similar to the sermons of Abū Zayd, shorn of the narrative surrounding it.[6]

Ṣāḥib al-Qurʾān al-Ilūrī also includes in his list of model *maqāma*s the collection of the 13th/19th-century Christian scholar Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī (d. 1287/1871) and the Mamluk-era *maqāma*s of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), as well as the much lesser-known Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1349). Finally, al-Ilūrī mentions the more recent collection of his Saudi contemporary ʿĀʾiḍ al-Qarnī (b. 1379/1959), the first edition of whose sixty-seven *maqāma*s was published in 1420/2000. This eclectic genealogy of the *maqāma* genre does not accord well with Euro-American attempts to make sense of the genre. It mixes together the narrative and non-narrative, the neo-Classical *maqāma*s of al-Yāzijī with the mélange of sermons, rhyming essays, and imagined conversations in the *maqāma*s of al-Qarnī. For al-Ilūrī, the *maqāma* seems to be more redolent of possibility and heterogeneity than the Euro-American versions of literary history might imply. Dr. Alagunfon's book is, in part, an invitation to scholars of literature and of Islam to provincialize their genealogies and their maps of where Arabic literature is produced, by whom, and for what purposes.

All of the *maqāma* authors whom al-Ilūrī mentions in his genealogy of the *maqāma* have had one or more of their *maqāma*s appear in print; however, we

4 Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama: A History of a Genre* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 179–183.

5 Ṣāḥib al-Qurʾān al-Ilūrī, *Maqāmāt al-Ilūrī* (Beirut: Dār al-Quds, 2017), 9.

6 Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama*, 182.

should keep in mind that much of the *maqāma* tradition remains accessible solely through manuscript witnesses. It therefore seems likely that the contours of the *maqāma* tradition will continue to grow and shift in the coming years. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila's initial catalogue of *maqāma* authors in his survey of the genre has provided a foundation for further study, as have the studies, editions, and translations by Maurice Pomerantz and others. Dr. Alagunfon's study pushes us to remember that the *maqāma* genre remains a living tradition and to take note of the fact that, even in the past century, Arabic literature is a transregional discourse that extends well beyond the Arab world. Nigerian Arabic literature is largely overlooked in the study of Arabic literature, even though, as Dr. Alagunfon points out, there are Nigerian novels, plays, and short stories written in Arabic. Indeed, he indicates that one of the *maqāma* authors, Imam Ọyọ (d. 1444/2023), also wrote a theatrical play. In other words, Imam Ọyọ is participating in both the long history of the Arabic *maqāma* genre and the more recent history of Arabic theatrical writing.

This last point brings me to a few other fascinating comments by Ṣāḥib al-Qur'ān al-Ilūrī in the published edition of his *Maqāmāt* that suggest he is well aware of the complicated relationship between the *maqāma* genre and what we might call literary modernity. In his authorial introduction, just after listing the *maqāma*s from which he draws inspiration, al-Ilūrī claims that his fifty *maqāma*s "are devoid of foreign ideas and Western tastes (*afkār ajnabiyya wa-adhwāq gharbiyya*)."[7] I take this to mean that al-Ilūrī is setting his *maqāma*s apart from genres and styles associated with the novel and other global genres with Western genealogies. What exactly al-Ilūrī means by "foreign ideas," however, is less clear, given that none of the *maqāma* authors whom he lists as models are from his native Yorubaland, and one of them is not even a fellow Muslim. In a footnote describing these foreign ideas, al-Ilūrī defines them as "the ideas of the other (*afkār al-ghayr*)," so perhaps he simply does not consider these *maqāma*s to belong to such a category because they are all part of the broader Arabic cosmopolis and its transhistorical, transregional tradition of writing and reading. The *maqāma* allows for a more capacious understanding of literary belonging than might be suggested by the boundaries of the nation state.

Is the *maqāma* style of al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī suitable for modernity? The Yorubaland scholar al-Ilūrī asks precisely this question in an afterword to his collection of *maqāma*s, and he naturally answers in the affirmative. Al-Ilūrī has, after all, written *maqāma*s in this style, and he explains briefly how the

7 al-Ilūrī, *Maqāmāt*, 9.

use of language, narrative, Qur'ānic allusion, and poetic citation are all well suited to this era. He admits, however, that there is one feature that makes this style less fitting for our times, which is that modern authors and readers cannot compare to the great litterateurs of previous eras. In this short passage, al-Ilūrī seems to signal that we live in a time that has difficulty appreciating the *maqāma* to the point that its presence in modernity must be justified. At the same time, he seems to admit that his *maqāma* collection will be a pale reflection of the great *maqāma* collections of ages past. We need not accept this value judgment that what came first is better. Even al-Ḥarīrī himself makes a similar comment in his own introduction, modestly presenting himself as a flawed successor to al-Hamadhānī. Rather, the *maqāma*s of Yorubaland should invite us to appreciate how rich with possibilities the *maqāma* genre continues to be for those who have immersed themselves in the tradition of al-Ḥarīrī and al-Hamadhānī.

Scholars of Arabic literature would do well to take notice of the *maqāma*s studied here by Dr. Alagunfon. We also are fortunate that Dr. Alagunfon gives careful attention to the cultural, social, and pedagogical contexts in which these authors thrive. Too often, our assumptions about literature, secularity, and religion obscure our understandings about the complexities of readers and reading practices. The Yorubaland scholars in Dr. Alagunfon's study are part of a longstanding tradition of Arabic education centered on the Qur'ān and the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī. Yorubaland scholars have chosen to compose new *maqāma*s, reveling in rhyming prose and arcane vocabulary, just as scores of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars in previous generations who had been embedded in similar pedagogical contexts had done. It is to be hoped that Dr. Alagunfon's book will bring these *maqāma*s to the attention of scholars working in the fields of Arabic literature, Islamic studies, and African studies to further our understanding of how these fields intersect and inform one another.

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Maps, Figures and Tables

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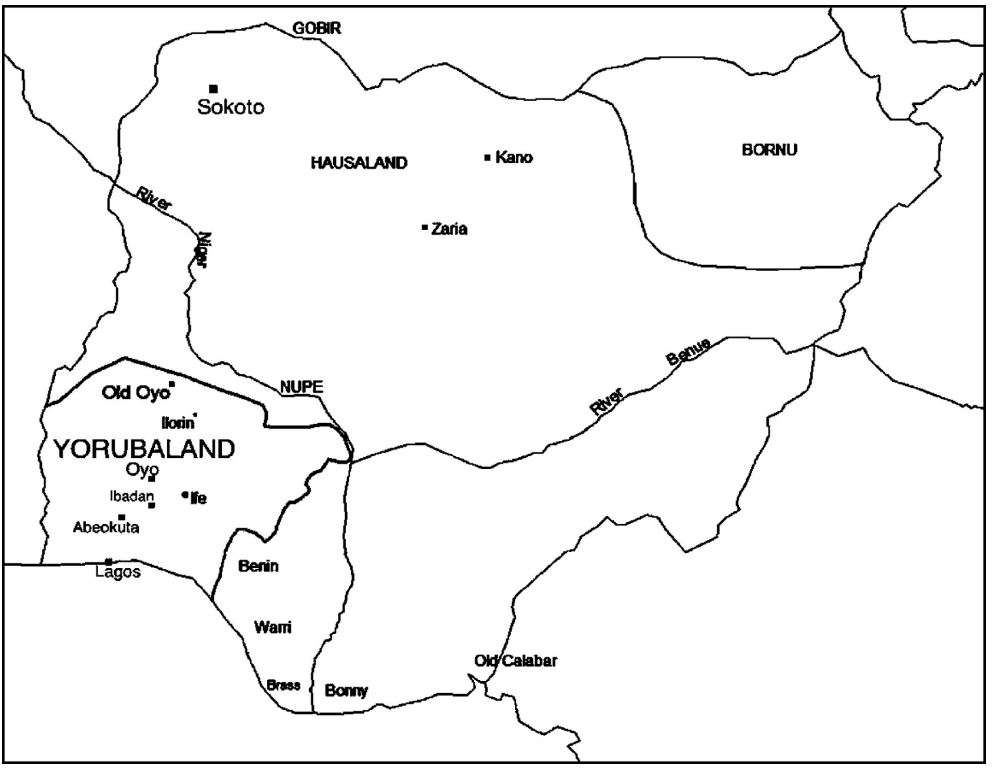
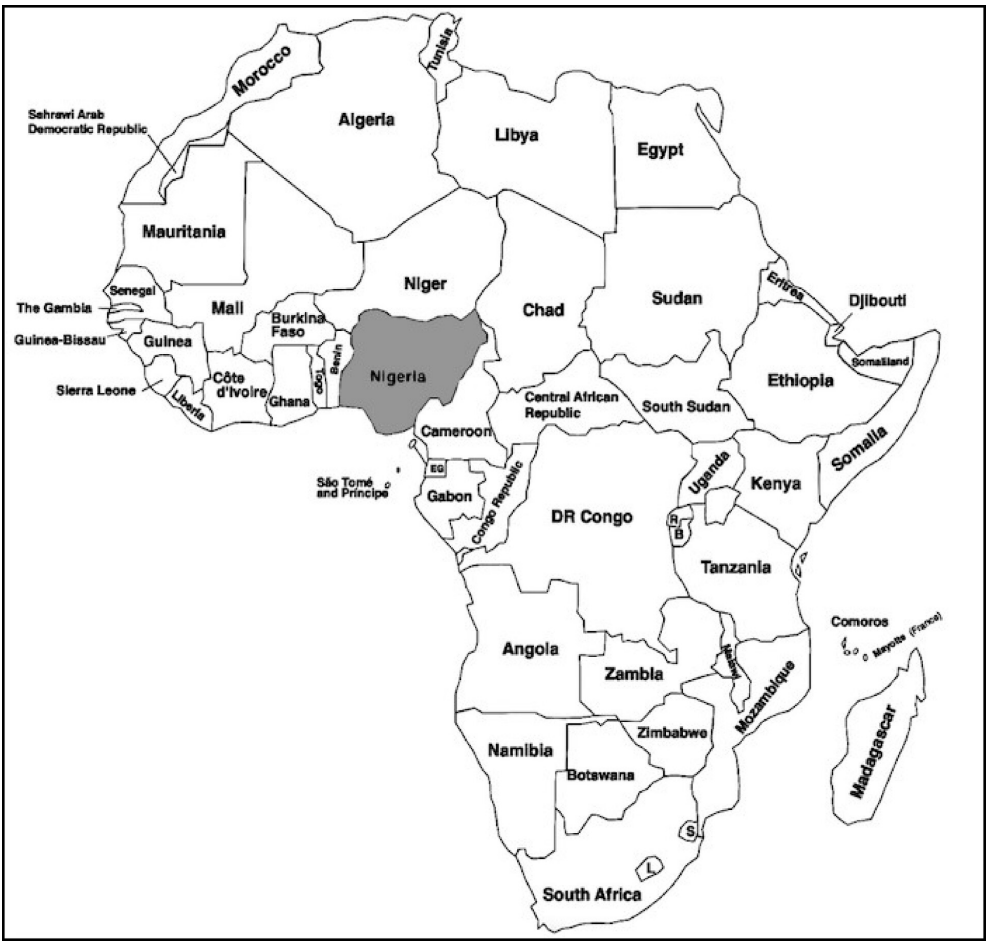


MAP 1 Yorubaland, in Nigerian Map

DRAWN BY THE RESEARCHER, BASED ON ARIBIDESI USMAN AND TOYIN FALOLA 2019, P. 33



MAP 2 Nigeria in African Map

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