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2011 will be remembered as a momentous year in North Africa when the sclerotic dictatorships of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya collapsed. Until then, the region seemed implacably immune to the democratic wave that began sweeping across the continent at the turn of the 1990s. Bookended by democratic transitions in Benin in 1989 and Nigeria in 1999, the 1990s witnessed tumultuous political changes across the continent characterized by tantalizing successes and tortuous setbacks. In 1991, for example, there was the victory of the opposition in Zambia and the implosion of the state in Somalia, and, most memorably, in 1994 the continent celebrated the triumph of South Africa and mourned the tragedy of Rwanda.

The twists and turns in the struggles for political transformation that came to be dubbed the “second independence” engulfed North Africa as well. But the violent suppression of the 1992 elections in Algeria and the country’s descent into civil war paralyzed the prospects of democratic transition in the region and fed into the narrative of North African exceptionalism. These developments reinforced the calcified division of Africa into two, Sub-Saharan Africa and Arab Africa, one supposedly pre-modern and the other anti-modern, the former capable of democratization and the latter irredeemably mired in autocracy. In reality, there were different trajectories within and across regions that defied the cartographic certainties of this tattered Eurocentric and Orientalist discourse.

In this article, I seek to remap the historical geography of the North African revolutions by placing them in their rightful African context of struggles for the “second independence”. After examining the general conditions and characteristics of what the Western media has dubbed the “Arab Awakening” and others call the “African Awakening” (Manji and Ekine 2011), the article will briefly outline the trajectory of the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. At appropriate junctures, their continental and international dimensions and implications will also be examined.

The similarities between the democracy movements and processes in North Africa and the rest of the continent are unmistakable in their causal dynamics, social composition, and political visions. Equally evident are the complex connections and demonstration effects from Tunisia to Egypt to Libya to other countries within and outside the continent. The reverberations of struggles among Africa countries go back to the nationalist struggles
against colonial rule during the twentieth century. While the drive for the “first independence” began in North Africa with the tentative decolonization of Egypt in 1922 and the more typical independence of Libya in 1951, the “second independence” that began in West Africa and Southern Africa is now finally shaking North Africa’s authoritarian political order. The North African revolutions, in turn, are rekindling struggles for the “second independence” in other parts of the continent against the remaining despotisms and the hijackings of the earlier transitions.

Fundamentally, then, the upheavals in North Africa are no different from the uprisings across the continent for the “second independence”. Like their counterparts elsewhere, the North Africans are fighting against the debilitating subversions of the dreams of the first “independence”. They are enraged and exhausted by repression and lack of meaningful political participation, the persistent humiliations at the hands of brutal and abusive regimes, deepening socioeconomic deprivations and inequalities, soaring unemployment and costs of living, the erosion of their citizenship rights and human rights, and the continued dependency and subordination of their countries in the global order. In short, the restive masses of North Africa want to live in states that enjoy legitimacy, are accountable, and promote social justice. They yearn for states that are overseen by scrupulous, visionary and patriotic leaders, and whose sovereignty is citizen-based, states that practice pluralistic, participatory politics. They seek developmental democratic states. They envision states capable of realizing the enduring dreams of the “first independence”, namely, self-determination, development, democracy, and dignity.

As in other parts of the continent, the major actors in the unfolding political drama and democratic movements in North Africa have generally included the disaffected youth, disenchanted middle classes, devastated working classes, disenfranchised Islamists, and the dominant militaries. The youth have been in the vanguard because they have borne the brunt of the frustrations and failed promises of the region’s neocolonial and neoliberal postcolonial states. The beleaguered middle class activists have brought their associational and rhetorical power, and the impoverished working classes infused their muscles for strike action. For their part, the Islamists who did not instigate the revolutions quickly mobilized their vast networks after the fall of the dictators to position themselves for the new dispensation. In the meantime, the militaries hedged their bets by either trying to remain neutral as in Tunisia, safeguarding their interests as in Egypt, or fighting for the collapsing regime as in Libya.

Each group harbored its own agenda, its own social imaginary of the future. Again, this is not peculiar to North Africa. In the annals of the struggles for the “second independence” across the continent there were different conceptions and visions of what a new democratic political order would entail. Five models can be identified in the pronouncements of African activists and thinkers (Zeleza 2005). Some advocated for what can be called a nativist model based on the presumed “consensus” or “consultative” democracy found in “traditional” societies and institutions. Others preferred a liberal model in which democracy rests on a multiparty system and periodic electoral contests. Then there were those who argued for a popular democratic model in which both the political and economic domains are based on democratic principles. In addition to these three secular models, in some parts of the continent Islamists seeking to enshrine Islamic law articulated a theocratic model. Finally, in response to the perceived pressures of globalization, which eroded the already truncated powers of the postcolonial state, a transnational model was propagated for the construction of integrated democratic regional or continental polities.

The 2011 awakening of North Africa began in Tunisia. The uprising took the regime and its apologists and friends by surprise as it violently jolted the country’s apparent
political placidity enforced by decades of state terror, and brought the disaffected masses to the streets and the attention of the world. Beneath its apparent political tranquility, tensions had been simmering in Tunisia for years, Ben Ali’s dictatorship was despised, its capacity to deliver growth without development and democracy severely eroded. The uprising was led by educated youths tired of high levels of unemployment. It erupted on 17 December, when Mohammed Bouazzi, a 26-year-old university graduate who became an unlicensed fruit-and-vegetable street vendor, doused himself in gasoline and set fire to himself when he was prevented by the authorities from conducting his business. Bouazzi’s self-immolation and death provided the match that ignited the uprising, which quickly spread across the country.

The youth were soon joined by the workers. In fact, there had been revolts led by disgruntled workers before, including the bread riots of 1984. In January 2008, nearly three years before the uprising, workers organized street protests in the towns of Gafsa and Redeyef against a state-owned company, accusing it of nepotistic hiring practices in collusion with the local leaders of the Tunisian General Federation of Labor (UGTT). Through the corporatist politics of the one-party state, the UGTT, once a radical movement in the struggle against colonialism, had become deradicalized. It only threw its weight behind the uprising when it became clear the regime was doomed (Beinin 2011). Members of the besieged middle classes, including lawyers, soon joined the protests in mounting numbers, incensed by rising prices, growing inequalities, and rampant corruption among the elites, including the president’s family, and systematic political repression.

The draconian response of the security forces only served to inflame the protesters and increasingly fearless political opposition. Not even a declaration of a state of emergency and belated concessions and promises by the beleaguered president that he would not contest the presidential elections of 2014 had much effect. The protesters smelled regime fear and pressed on. On 14 January, President Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, like other notorious dictators before him such as Uganda’s Idi Amin.

It was an inglorious end to a vicious and venal leader who had seized power in a palace coup in 1987 against the country’s founding president, Habib Bourguiba, citing senility. President Ben Ali proceeded to win elections, in the venerable Soviet tradition, with more than 99% of the vote in 1989, 1994, and 1999, and 95% in 2004, and 89% in 2009. News of his flight into exile electrified the region and sent shock waves in the palaces of dictators around North Africa, the rest of the continent, and the neighboring countries of Western Asia.

Television audiences followed the unfolding political drama on Western stations, AlJazeera, Facebook, and twitter. Some went so far as to credit social media for the uprising, forgetting that technology does not by itself cause revolutions; at best, it facilitates it as the print media and radio did for Africa’s anti-colonial nationalist movements. Others even called it the first Wikileaks revolution on the facetious assumption that the revelations in US embassy cables shocked the nation into realization about the grotesque depths of corruption among their leaders. Surely, Tunisians already knew that. In any case, this knowledge had no discernible positive effect on official US policy in terms of supporting struggles for democracy. On the contrary, the US brazenly coddled the Ben Ali dictatorship as it did President Mubarak’s and other pro-American authoritarian regimes in Africa and the Arab world.

In the days of the Cold War Western support for the autocracies in the region was justified in the name of anti-communism. In the post-9/11 world, anti-terrorism and fighting Islamist extremism became the rationale for such unsavory alliances and support. In reality, as Samir Amin (2011, 285) has forcefully argued, “political Islam throughout
the Muslim world is quite assuredly a strategic ally of the United States and its NATO minority partners.” He points to the simple fact that some of the US’s staunchest allies are the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, which follow archaic, ritualist, and conformist tenets of Wahhabi Islam compared to the Sufis elsewhere who are allies of the democratic movement.

In the months following Ben Ali’s ouster, the old political class desperately sought to retain control while various social forces behind the revolution pressed on with renewed protests, strikes, and demonstrations at the same time as they jostled for supremacy. Within a few weeks the old ruling party was abolished and the interim prime minister, a close confidante and leading member of the ousted regime, resigned. It increasingly became clear that the Islamists coalesced around the moderate Nahdah party would outperform the youth and liberal middle classes because they were better organized. In the constituent assembly elections of 23 October, the party won a plurality of 90 out of 217 seats, to the consternation of the liberal parties. The contestation between the two blocs was less about the role of religion in politics than about the differences of class and culture between the coastal elites and the mainly working-class and hinterland followers of Nahdah.

The Tunisian uprising was both homegrown and transnational in the complex webs of its contexts and causalities. It was rooted in historical and contemporary grievances and aspirations of the Tunisian people for more democratic modes of governance and development, for a social order that was more just, more inclusive, and more responsive to the wellbeing of the ordinary people not just the parasitic political class and the pampered bourgeoisie.

Eleven days after the flight of Ben Ali into exile, the Egyptian uprising broke out. Its iconic spark was also a young man, Khaled Said, a 28 year old from Alexandria who was abducted by the police for failing to show his ID and tortured and beaten to death at a police station on 6 June 2010. The success of the Tunisian revolution emboldened the Egyptian youth. Within days of the start of the uprising, the world watched electrifying images of waves of protesting crowds braving police terror and staring down army tanks to reclaim the streets and their overcrowded neighborhoods from Cairo to Alexandria and other cities around the country. Tahrir Square became the epicenter of the revolution, a powerful political theater where Egyptians proclaimed to themselves and the world that they had finally lost their fear – fear of the regime’s massive security apparatus, fear from the burdens of history and the future, fear of their alleged passivity and apathy.

As in Tunisia, there had been protests before that had grown in intensity over the years. There were the bread riots of 1977, which forced President Sadat to rescind steep food price increases. From 1998, when Egypt began implementing the privatization program it agreed to in 1991, there were “4,000 strikes, sit-ins and other collective actions involving millions of workers” (Beinin 2011, 25). The factors behind the uprising were only a mystery to those who believed the canard propagated by the regime itself and its manipulative and misguided Western allies that Egypt was a stable, moderate state, a bulwark against the evil forces of Islamist extremism, an indispensable partner for Middle East peace and security.

The uprising came as a culmination of simmering grievances against the regime over its mismanagement of the economy, which had led to high levels of unemployment, spiraling costs of living, widening social disparities, declining living standards for the stressed middle classes, and deepening poverty for the workers and peasants, at the same time as the elites became richer. But the protests were motivated by more than economic grievances. The regime had corrupted the entire society, robbing it of its enormous potential. The electoral system was a cruel joke. People were dismayed by the absurd
extent to which the regime was prepared to go during the parliamentary elections of November 2010 when the ruling party won 98% of the seats. For many Egyptians, the decadent Mubarak regime had also unforgivably diminished Egypt’s position and the respect accorded to it in the Arab world. They resented the steady erosion of their country’s historic role as the region’s cultural, religious, social, economic, and political heartland.

The regime responded quite predictably. Initially, the protests were blamed on the Muslim Brotherhood and unnamed “foreign hands”. Then an internet blackout was imposed and the cell phone network unplugged. When none of these measures deterred the protesters, the army was called in. In Tunisia it had taken weeks for the army to intervene; in Egypt it happened in a matter of days. Two and half weeks after the uprising began, on 11 February, President Mubarak resigned. Unlike Tunisia, where a transitional civilian government was appointed, the Egyptian military stepped in as the Supreme Council of Egyptian Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed power. In the months and weeks that followed, it became clear to Egyptians that little had changed as the military shamelessly sought to hijack the revolution through mass arrests and military trials of activists, slow pace of reform, and passage of draconian legislation, such as the law enacted on 23 March banning strikes.

In response, mass protests resumed to save the revolution and for people to voice frustration with military rule. The protests grew larger and angrier in July and August. From October the protestors began openly calling for the ouster of the SCAF and in November they defiantly reoccupied Tahrir Square, the symbol of the revolution, in numbers reminiscent of the heydays of the uprising before Mubarak’s overthrow. It became patently clear that the army was locked in the logic of the 1952 revolution in which it saw itself as the custodian of the nation and embodiment of state power. Thus, the 2011 revolution was shackled to the previous revolutions of 1919 and 1952.

Economic, political, and nationalist grievances also inspired the two earlier revolutions. The 1919 revolution encompassed, much like the 2011 uprising, mass protests and strikes involving both Muslims and Christians, men and women, and people from different social classes, including students, workers, peasants, merchants, civil servants, and professional elites. It succeeded in bringing limited independence from British colonialism, which the 1952 revolution sought to complete by removing the monarchy and the remnants of imperial oversight. But the latter left behind what used to be called an overdeveloped state, a state in which the society and economy were overdetermined by the military and security apparatus. In fact, Egypt’s 1952 revolution marked the first military coup in modern African history, whose dubious legacy was to haunt postcolonial Africa in decades to come.

Under the one-party secular and socialist state, civil and political rights were severely curtailed, whereas economic and social rights were promoted. The result was that, on the one hand, political parties were banned, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and, on the other, women were given the right to vote. In short, Egypt emerged from the 1952 revolution with the typical structural imbalances and incapacities of the postcolonial state. Its inherited authoritarian reflexes and instruments of repression were refined in subsequent decades, culminating in the tyranny and political pathologies of the Mubarak regime when any semblance of a nationalist developmental state project had long been abandoned.

For its survival the increasingly bankrupt regime relied on Western support. In the meantime, domestically President Sadat, who turned to the West and abandoned Nasser’s revolutionary aspirations, began cultivating an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, who were left to provide social welfare to the poor that the state had largely forsaken. Not surprisingly, the Brotherhood, which was increasingly infiltrated by the conservative Islamic ideologies from the Gulf states where Egyptian workers migrated in their millions,
played a relatively muted role in the 2011 uprising. The alliance between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood became increasingly evident to the chagrin of the youth and secular liberal forces that had spearheaded the revolution. The maneuverings of the Muslim Brotherhood produced strains and splits within the once largely monolithic movement (Howeidy 2011; Tarek 2011).

For the Western powers led by the US, the demise of the Mubarak dictatorship, which they had bankrolled for three decades, was deeply unsettling. The policy contortions, contradictions, and uncertainties became painfully clear in their desperate public pronouncements that seemed to shift by the day. After Mubarak was deposed, they threw their weight behind the SCAF in the age-old name of maintaining stability and an orderly transition. When the military’s institutional self-interest and duplicity became too obvious to ignore, they feebly called on it to expedite the transition. Many Western commentators who were caught flat-footed by the uprising scurried for explanations and policy advice. Predictably, many expressed worries about the dangers posed by the Muslim Brotherhood when the latter’s real threat was not to Western interests but to genuine Egyptian democracy, which neither they nor the Western powers preferred. Nevertheless, as with the Tunisian uprising, the Egyptian uprising underscored the fact that the US and its European allies neither anticipated, instigated, welcomed, nor controlled the struggles for democracy, although they quickly sought to contain and manipulate them.

In Libya, the Western powers seized the opportunity to intervene militarily and directly influence the course of the transition from the regime of Moammar Gadhafi, the colorful, eccentric, irascible, and ruthless tyrant of one of Africa’s most enduring dictatorships. The end for Gadhafi came with unpredictable swiftness. The revolt began four days after Mubarak was deposed in Egypt when protests broke out in Benghazi on 15 February. The protests were held in front of the police headquarters and they resulted in clashes between the protesters and the security forces. Two days later a group called the National Conference for the Libyan Opposition called for mass protests against the regime in commemoration of demonstrations that were brutally suppressed in the city five years earlier.

Within two weeks the rebellion had spread and the United Nations had passed a resolution imposing an arms embargo on the country and a travel ban, frozen the assets of Gadhafi’s family and certain government officials, and referred the situation to the International Criminal Court. This was soon followed by another resolution that imposed a no-fly zone and tightened sanctions on the regime and its supporters. For the next few months fighting raged between the rebel forces and the army over the major cities, some of which changed hands several times, until 21 August when Tripoli, where one-third of Libyans live, fell to the rebels. Jubilant crowds gathered in the Green Square, which was given its original name, Martyr Square. Two months later, on 20 October, Gadhafi was captured and brutally murdered. On 23 October, the National Transition Council declared the end of the war and liberation of the country.

By then, many Western states and their allies among conservative Arab governments long opposed to the Gadhafi regime had already recognized the National Transition Council. In fact, the Western powers used the support of the Arab League as a cover for their intentions to intervene in Libya militarily. Western detractors accused NATO of violating the UN resolutions, scuttling a peaceful resolution, and perpetrating a cycle of violence that would haunt post-Gadhafi Libya. Many called attention to the high cost, the dangers of what they called mission cluelessness, mission creep or mission creak, of reproducing the quagmire of Iraq and Afghanistan, and worsening the plight of the Libyan civilians. In their opinion, the NATO mission represented an imperial hijacking that threatened the Arab revolution. In the US, the Obama Administration was either accused
of failing to take decisive action to avoid stalemate, or failing to get Congressional consent thereby making the war illegal.

Some of the strongest criticism against NATO’s so-called “humanitarian mission” in Libya came from African governments, most of which withheld recognition of the NTC-led Libyan government for as long as they could. They accused NATO of committing a war of aggression against an African state and undermining peacemaking efforts by the African Union (AU). In South Africa, which had supported the UN resolutions, the government came under withering attack from radical quarters. When Nigeria, which had no love lost for Gadafi’s interference in Nigerian and West African affairs and also supported the resolution, recognized the NTC government before authorization from the AU, South Africa criticized the move. The latter tried to regain its radical credentials by initially blocking the release of $1.5 billion in frozen Libyan funds for humanitarian aid and other civilian needs.

Many African commentators echoed the sentiments of African governments. They argued that NATO’s invasion had less to do with protecting civilians than with strategic interests, especially Libya’s vast oil resources. To some, the West had always had it in for Gadafi for being a revolutionary and radical Pan-Africanist. In short, he was being punished for his “long-term ‘insubordination’ to western imperialism”’ (Hossein-Zadeh 2011). Yash Tandon (2011) tried to distinguish between Gadafi objectively as a “neo-colonial dictator” and subjectively as an “anti-imperialist”. Other African commentators found such sophistries and the support for Gadafi quite troubling. Human rights activists were particularly adamant in their criticism of the Gadafi dictatorship. The veteran Ghanaian journalist, Cameron Duodu (2011), forcefully argued that Gadafi had long shed any anti-Western, revolutionary, or progressive credentials he may have once had in his despicable self-deification and relentless terror against his own people.

It is clear that the ousting of the Gadafi regime came through a popular uprising, an armed rebellion, and international military intervention, which promised to profoundly affect the political trajectory of post-Gadafi Libya, making it exceptionally complicated and contentious. The interplay of civil and armed struggle recalled Africa’s struggles for the “first independence” from colonialism rather than the struggles for the “second independence” from postcolonial authoritarianism. The closest and most recent parallel could be seen in the end of apartheid in South Africa. The obvious difference is that the South African liberation movement did not seize power by defeating the apartheid army. It succeeded in making the country ungovernable and forcing a negotiated settlement, which partly explains post-apartheid South Africa’s preference, indeed obsession, with negotiated settlements from Zimbabwe to Cote d’Ivoire to Libya.

In postcolonial Africa there are several examples of regime changes that came about through armed struggle. The first successful case was the seizure of power by Yoweri Museveni’s rebel forces in Uganda in 1986. Popular rebellions and struggles have brought down numerous governments since the onset of Africa’s current democratic wave, which began two decades ago. Africa also has a long history of external interventions in which international and local forces colluded in overthrowing governments. The fall of Patrice Lumumba’s regime in the Congo in 1960 and Kwame Nkrumah’s in Ghana in 1966 enjoy particular notoriety in progressive African circles. On the flip side, there is Cuba’s highly regarded intervention in Angola that saved the MPLA regime and humbled the regional military might of apartheid South Africa and accelerated the demise of its hold over Namibia and brought closer the winds of liberation to the apartheid laager itself. More recently, there was the limited French intervention in Cote d’Ivoire against the obdurate regime of Laurent Gbagbo, who refused to accept electoral defeat.
What is unusual in the Libya imbroglio is the combination of all three dimensions of regime change. The scale of international military intervention in the fall of the Gadhafi regime is unprecedented in Africa’s recent struggles for the “second independence”. There can be little doubt that the victory of the rebels was facilitated by NATO, which provided air cover and helped degrade the Gadhafi military machine and enabled the rebels to advance on the ground. Similarly, it is unquestionable that the Western powers will seek to reap the spoils of war and try to turn Libya into an even more pliant neocolonial outpost.

The question remains, what made Libya, unlike Tunisia and Egypt, vulnerable to this lethal combination of forces? The answers lie in the peculiar internal and external political economies of Libya. Internally, Libya had failed to develop a vibrant civil society and government institutions that could facilitate a political transition; externally, it had alienated its North African neighbors and incurred the wrath of Western powers from its early revolutionary days. Like the oil-rich states of the Arabian Gulf, Libya bought the acquiescence of the population by establishing a generous welfare state, but the price was gross political underdevelopment. No political parties existed, civil society was weak, government institutions including the army were brittle and dysfunctional, and the state was indistinguishable from Gadhafi himself.

Civil society was stunted and effective governing compromised by the political inertia inherent in the tensions and degeneration of the 1969 revolution that brought Colonel Gadhafi to power. While the People’s Congresses recognized the people as the source and agents of legitimation, the Revolutionary Committees promoted the idea of the supremacy of the revolution above all else. Revolution was seen as a permanent condition at whose apex stood the Guide or Brother Leader, who was beyond the formal titles of state power (Roberts 2011). Yet, Gadhafi was clearly in charge. As the founder of the revolutionary republic, Gadhafi embodied the state in a way that Ben Ali in Tunisia or Mubarak in Egypt never did. This made it hard to sustain peaceful struggle and turned opposition to Gadhafi’s rule into an assault on the state itself.

Reinforcing the susceptibility of Libya to armed rebellion was the country’s divided political geography, the divisions between western and eastern Libya, representing the historic faultlines of North Africa’s Maghreb and Mashreq regions, which were superimposed on the divide between the coastal and desert zones, not to mention the disparate social forces that fomented the revolution from radical Islamists to royalists to traditionalists to secular middle-class activists. Libya’s isolation in North Africa also increased its vulnerability. Successive attempts to forge alliances with its neighbors had failed, with Egypt in 1972, Tunisia in 1974, and Algeria in 1975, as these countries abandoned radical Pan-Arabism and accommodated themselves to the West and free-market neoliberalism. Libya then turned its attention to its southern neighbors and became a loud proponent of Pan-Africanism and a lavish patron of governments and rebel movements in the other African regions, and the African Union. But when the time of reckoning came, the Arab League threw him to the wolves of NATO and the enfeebled African Union could not save him.

The awakening of North Africa recasts Africa’s political map and the trajectories of the struggles and constructions of the “second independence”. As Charles Onyango-Obbo (2011) contends, it helps dissolve the mythical boundary between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa in so far as the former can no longer be seen as incapable of democracy. Whatever their specific courses, the North African revolutions have already succeeded in rekindling the faltering energies of the “second independence” across Africa and brought the Arab Spring to western Asia. The struggles for Africa’s “first independence” were protracted, peaking in the three decades between the 1950s and 1970s, although there were outliers in this long historical drama – Egypt in 1922 and South Africa in 1994. With the
North African awakening of 2011, the struggles for the “second independence” have now entered their third decade. The processes and prospects for the “second independence” are likely to be as protracted and complex as those of the “first independence”. What is less doubtful is that they will continue to be fueled by the enduring dreams of African peoples for self-determination, development, democracy, and dignity.

Note
1. This paper draws heavily on three blog essays I wrote posted on the Zeleza Post (Zeleza 2011a, 2011b, 2011c), which in turn examined hundreds of stories from the African and Western print and online media. For examples of the contrasting views of a conservative British and progressive American magazine on what they call the “Arab Awakening”, see the lead stories in The Economist (2011a, 2011b) and The Nation (2011).

Notes on contributor
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Bibliography