

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The communicativeness of incantations in the traditional Igbo society

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**This paper examines the communicativeness of incantations in the traditional Igbo society. Incantations are given force by oral tradition, a practice whereby the social, political, economic and cultural heritage of the people is communicated by word of mouth from one generation to another. It was the most predominant part of communication in many parts of Africa. Prior to colonialism, the African society, including the Igbo used oral tradition as a veritable tool in information gathering, sharing/dissemination and indeed worship. They lived normal and satisfactory lives, cultivated, built, ate, sang, danced, healed their sick, created and communicated. Incantation is one of the modes of communication in the traditional Igbo society. In an incantation, all words stand for something and are meaningful. Most of the cultural displays of the Igbo society employ incantations in communicating with spirits. While some aspects of the practice may appear fetish and obsolete, several others are purely traditional and, destroying it outrightly amounts to throwing away a baby with the dirty water. This article traces the effectiveness of incantation as a mode of communication, examines its uses and purposes, while highlighting the implications of allowing it go into extinction. It recommends that the people's way of life should not be extinguished, but preserved.**

**Key words:** Communication, incantation, African traditional religion, Igbo, kolanut.

## INTRODUCTION

Normally, communication is classified into intra-personal, inter-personal and mass communication (Okunna, 1999). However, in African communication systems, Wilson (1998:47) and Konkwo (1997) submit that there is "extra-mundane" communication and as Akpabio (2003:31) puts it "Supernatural Communication" which involves supernatural beings –ancestors, spirits, gods, the supreme God – or when they involve processes, elements or abilities that are superhuman as in witchcraft,

reincarnation, etc.

Besides, Ibagere (1994:93) refers to it as the esoteric mode. He argues that "the word *esoteric* has been so chosen to describe this mode because of the peculiar nature of the mode in that its understanding depends, to a large extent, on the psychic development of the individual." The esoteric mode of communication involves all the other modes. The major difference however, is that they are operated in the metaphysical plane; hence,

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the need for some sort of initiation to be able to understand its intricacies. In short, it is for the recondite. The communication could be verbal or non-verbal. The whole essence of this mode bothers on the interpretation of events [information] that have been experienced on the metaphysical plane as relevant and relating to real life experiences (Ibagere, 1994:93).

These might account for why Modum (1980) submitted that while the modern man's god is science and his religion, the traditional Nigerian sphere of influence of existence is associated with the sacred realm of the gods- more precisely the essence of and continuation and social life are guaranteed through well determined and periodical contacts with the deities during which the society not only renews its faith in gods, but also reiterates the factors of life and death.

Incantation suggests the use of spells or verbal charms spoken or sung as a part of a ritual of magic. It is a ritual recitation of words or sounds believed to have a magical effect. In an incantation, all words stand for something, and finding the words that are appropriate for your purposes will make or break an incantation.

Incantation as a form of communication occurs between the supernatural and living beings, as a system of belief in individual cultural setting. It could take the form of charms, songs, (dirges), ritual prayers, sacrifice, libations (as seen in *Schnapps* advert-the drink for early morning prayers...).

In the typical African society, it is more predominant during cultural festivities, marriage consecrations, naming, among other traditional events. In modern times, it takes the form of obituaries, packaged as transitions as well as memorial tunes –Rest in Peace (RIP). (Konkwo, 1997).

According to Wilson (1998), it involves intra-personal processes such as physical revelation, magical, other-worldly verbalization and spiritual transmigration and may carry elements of ordinary cultural celebration, dedication and consecration.

### What is Incantation?

Wikipedia encyclopedia sees incantation or enchantment as a charm or spell created using words. An incantation may take place during a ritual, either a hymn or prayer, and may invoke or praise a deity. In magic, occultism, witchcraft and general diabolism practice, it may be used with the intention of casting a spell on an object or a person. The term derives from Latin "incantare" (tr.), meaning "to chant (a magical spell) upon," from *in-*"into, upon" and *cantare* "to sing".

In traditional fairy tales, an enchantment is a magical spell that is attached on a relatively permanent basis, to a specific person, object or location, and alters its qualities, generally in a positive way. An enchantment with negative characteristics is usually referred to as a curse. They could also be used to describe spells that

are really not effective, but merely used to deceive people by either manipulating their thoughts or by some kind of illusion. To be enchanted means to be under the influence of an enchantment, usually thought to be caused by charms or spells. An enchanter or enchantress is a person that casts magic spells or makes incantations.

### Oral tradition

Oral tradition is the practice whereby the social, political, economic and cultural heritage of the people is communicated by word of mouth from one generation to another (Konkwo, 1997). It was the most predominant part of communication in many parts of Africa; prior to colonialism. The Igbo of Nigeria and the African society at large, used oral tradition as a veritable tool in information sharing and dissemination, and indeed worship. In fact, incantation makes use of oral tradition.

### The Igbos of Nigeria

Wikipedia encyclopedia describes the Igbo people as an indigenous linguistic and cultural people of southern Nigeria. Geographically, the Igbo homeland is divided into two unequal sections by the Niger River– an eastern (which is the larger of the two) and a western section. Culturally and linguistically, the Niger River has provided an easy means of communication and unity amongst the Igbo natives on both sides, as well as promoted ancient trade and movement of people between Igboland and rest of the world.

Known as Ndi Igbo in the Igbo language and sometimes identified by their respective dialects or subgroupings, they speak Igbo, which includes various dialects. The Igbo homeland is almost surrounded on all sides by other ethnic people of southern and central Nigeria, namely, the Ijaw, Edo, Itsekiri, Ogoni, Igala, Tiv, Yako, Idoma and Ibibio.

The Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, with a population of about thirty four (34) million. In rural Nigeria, Igbo people work mostly as craftsmen, farmers and traders. They have related ethnic groups such as Ekpeye, Igbo jews, Ibibio, Efik, Annang, Ogoni, etc.

Igbos, prior to colonisation, existed in many independent city states, ranging from those in present day Edo state and Agbor in Delta state, to those across the Cross River. From the forests of Anambra state to the swamps of Rivers state, Igbos are present in great numbers. Many of these city states developed their own independent dialect of the Igbo language, which were mutually intelligible. For example "Iye o zhi l'ume m", in Ekpeye dialect (Rivers State) was equivalent to "'Ife o ne- emele m" in Anambra dialect. Despite these differences, an Anambra man would easily understand

the Igbo of an Agbor man and vice versa.

By way of origin, some traced their ancestry to biblical Israel, as the far-flung descendants of Jacob, the Jewish patriarch. Gad, Jacob's seventh son, is said to have had three sons who settled in South-eastern Nigeria. These sons; Eri, Arodi and Areli, are believed to have fathered clans in Igbo-land and to have founded such Igbo towns as Aguleri, Arochukwu, Owerri and Umuleri.

There have been some arguments over the difference between Igbo as a people and Igbo as a language. That is not the crux of this paper. Today, the core of the Igbos in Nigeria is situated in five states that make up the South Eastern part of Nigeria. They are: Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi States. The raging controversy over whether the Ikwerre, Etche, Ogba, Ndoni and other Igbo speaking parts of Rivers state, as well as other neighbouring states of Nigeria are Igbos remains unsettled. While some say they are Igbos, others attempt to trace their origin from some other sources.

However, despite being marginalized in the entity called Nigeria, especially, since after the Nigeria Civil war of 1967-1970, there is no gainsaying that Nigeria as a country cannot survive without the Igbos. Even the bitterest adversaries of the Igbo cannot but admit that, as a people, they are very resourceful and ingenious. This has often been the cause of their envy and dislike by others.

Till date, the real locomotive of Nigeria's indigenous industrialization lies in Aba in Abia state and in the cottage-industries of the Igbo heartland. Ndi Igbo are at the fore front of Nigeria's economic development, till date. For Nigeria's dream of being the Japan and China of Africa, the ingenuity of the Igbo is an indelible part of its actualization.

### **Igbo traditional society**

Wikipedia encyclopedia sees traditional Igbo political organizations as based on a quasi-democratic republican system of government. It was witnessed by the Portuguese, who first arrived and met with the Igbo people in the 15th century. With the exception of a place like Onitsha, which had kings called Obi and places like Nri kingdom and Arochukwu, which had priest king; Igbo communities and area governments were ruled by a republican consultative assembly of the people. Communities were governed and administered by a council of elders.

Title holders were respected because of their accomplishments and capabilities, but were never referred to as kings. They often perform special functions given to them by such assemblies. Umunna is a form of patrilineal group maintained by the Igbo. Law starts with the Umunna, which is a male line of descent from a founding ancestor (who the lineage is sometimes

named after) with groups of compounds containing closely related families headed by the oldest member. The Umunna can be seen as the most important pillar of Igbo society (Nicholas, 2015).

Notwithstanding the level or organisation, the Igbo traditional practices come to bear whenever there is an Igbo gathering. A typical instance is the presentation of Kolanut and its ceremonies. It is instructive that Kola is a sign of acceptance/reception of a visitor. In every typical Igbo gathering, Kolanut must be presented and the tradition of presentation observed.

### **Incantation in Igbo Culture/Society**

"Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways" (Kramsch 2009: 3). Culture is a crucial part of communication. Taylor (1871) understands culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Gamble and Gamble (2002:35) on their own see culture as "a system of knowledge, beliefs, values, customs, behaviors and artifacts that are acquired, shared and used by members during daily living". "Each culture constitutes a unique lifestyle –a unique combination of values, rules, roles and relationship that provide a guide for socially defined appropriate behaviour" (Ogunbameru and Rotimi, 2006: 235).

Culture is transmitted from one generation to another. It reflects the people's way of life, beliefs and inherent orientation. For instance, in most societies, traditional medical beliefs form integral part of a network of values that constitute their culture and incantation is one of such beliefs. Incantation is very popular in Igbo culture and is still being practiced in contemporary Igbo society.

Incantation is also viewed as an act of magic which involves using words of one or more languages that may not have a direct meaning or even are meaningless in order to satisfy the needs of people (Bunza, 2006; Abubakar, 2006; Doguwa, 2002). Therefore, incantation is a collection or combination of special words that are uttered or sung to have magic effect. Kabir (1991: 181) sees incantation as having "a poetic quality and rhythm and powerful striking words are used. In reciting it, sometimes one uses a high piercing sound and sometimes slow and soft sounds to punctuate and emphasize whatever is being said". It also involves doing some kind of activity, apart from using the special spiritual passwords.

In the traditional Igbo society, incantation belongs to the family of extra-mundane mode of communication; which is believed to take place between the living and the dead and/or the supernatural and Supreme Being.

This kind of communication includes: rituals as 'Igo-oyo' (traditional worship), *Iwa oji* (breaking of kolanut) and *itu oza mmii* (pouring of libation). Whereas this practice reflects clearly, a significant aspect of the world view of the Igbo, it also demonstrates the communicability of the living and the dead (Konkwo, 1997).

In order to see how incantation works in Igboland, let us give a little insight, as it relates to incantations (prayer) made for the breaking of Kola nuts (*Iwa oji*).

*Ndi mbu ndi egede, oji abiala*  
(Our ancestors, kola has come)  
*Ala bia taa oji*  
(The land, come and eat kola)  
*Chukwu kere elu na ala, oji abiala*  
(The Creator of heaven and the earth, Kola has come)  
*Amadioha bia taa oji*  
(Amadioha-god of the masses, come and eat kola)  
*Mmuo oma nile bianu taa oji*  
(All good spirits come and eat kola)  
*Egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibeya ebela, nku kwaa ya*  
(Live and let live)



Source: Google images

### Breaking/blessing of Kolanut in Igbo land

Blessing of Kolanut in Igbo traditional society is a serious business and not done by people without the requisite qualification(s). The environment determines the qualification of the persons. Prior to the blessing of the kolanut, one significant thing that must be observed is that it moves from hand to hand. First, the elders of the land owners (depending on the environment) are shown the Kola and from there it goes round to other relevant persons, as the tradition provides. After the movement of the Kolanut, it is returned to the title holder before blessing.

Konkwo (1997) opines that:

*"In this type of invocation of the divinities and spirits and the prayer for the welfare of man, the ofo holder in Igbo land communicates with the Supreme Being and the dead, asking them for protection, solidarity and prosperity. Extra mundane communication is characterized by a sense of unidirectionality, in that there is no perceivable immediacy in the response between the communicator and recipient. All the communicator feels is that he has been able to establish the environment, as well as the spiritual pre-requisite for communication and intercession with the divinities"*

(Konkwo 1997:49).

On such occasions as religious crusades, prayer sessions, rituals and other religious and pseudo-spiritual activities, there seems to be for the participants a sort of feedback which takes place in the form of intra-personal processes, physical revelations or magical, other worldly verbalization (Wilson, 1990).

Incantation is very popular in other African cultures (such as Fulfulde, Yoruba, Igbo, Nupe, Kanuri, among others) and in other cultures far away from Africa (Bunza, 2006: 228). In Igbo tradition, incantation is broadly classified into two, namely: traditional and modern. Traditional incantation uses only Igbo words and expressions, without any form of foreign intervention, while modern incantation is influenced by religious, language and/or foreign culture. The latter uses borrowed words from other languages.

### Ikpe ekpere (prayers)

Prayer has always been a central part of Igbo life. It served as a direct link to *ala mmuo* (the spirit land). Below is an excerpt from pages 199-200 of *Traditional Igbo Beliefs and Practices* by IK Ogbukagu, (1997). A morning prayer of this nature was done every day by the head of each household while offering *oji* (kola nut) to the different divinities.

*"A kpopu uzo, a kpopu onu*

The dawning of a new day marks the beginning of a routine struggling for the means of human and other beings existence

*Ubosi kpatalu nu nya likalie*

The day that fetches more benefits than others deserves to have more of those items of benefit

*Uchu adi agba mma ekwu*

The pen knife routinely deployed for splitting of kolanuts because of the nature of its assignment is always assured of early morning breakfast

*O bu n'igwe, O bu n'ana, chedo anyi*

God who lives in heaven and on earth, please protect our interest

*Omehia, Odokwaa*

God you destroy and regenerate lives

*O sibe, O dika a ma elisi*

God bestows gifts as though these benevolence would remain endless

*E lisie, o dika a ma eweta ozo*

He allows or rescinds these gifts as he considers appropriate or expedient

*Taa oji a n'otu ka anyi taa ya n'ibe n'ibe*

Almighty God, take this kolanut in whole, while we take it in cotyledons

*Oru mmuo na nnu mmo bianu taa oji*

All classes of spirit/elementals, especially the good ones, please have your own share of this nut

*Ichie ukwu na ichi nta*

Titled and non-titled ancestors to join us in this exercise

*Ndi mvu na ndi egede*

The primordial and other ancestors of the spirit world also to join

*A nalu nwata ife o ji ama mma mma ya aluru*

When a child is deprived of what he loves he subsequently is made miserable

*Ana, ndi afulu anya na ndi afuro anya, nke na enwero okpa ibe ya kwota ya n'azu*

This land, indigines dead and alive; among the dead; the deformed and the crippled helped by others also are invited to join

*Unu ekwena ka oji dalue ana, ma o bu ka nwa-ngwele gbaa aji*

(Almighty God) do not allow this kolanut to drop from my hand or subject us to any misfortune today

*Ofo nna m nyiba m alo, e welu m aka abo bulu ya*

I will at all costs endeavour to protect all the heritages handed over to me by my father

*Mmuo na anoro ya, mmadu ebulu oche ya*

If an oracle vacates its seat, a human being takes over

*Izuzugbe nzugbe, anunu gbe*

All (spirits/ancestors) are enjoined to rally and then fully participate in these early morning prayers

*O sii nwata, jide nkakwu, ya ga-ekunye mmili o ga-eji kwo aka*

Anyone who makes a child commit a crime will have to bear the consequence of his action

*Oso chuba nwata, o gbanaa ikwu nne ya*

A child who has a serious disagreement with his fraternal household may opt to move over and settle with his maternal relatives

*Nee ubosi taata dozie ya ka o di ka ibe ya*

God bless today as you did with other days

*Ndi ilo ezuana anyi n'uzo*

We earnestly pray we do not fall prey to the evil plans of our enemies

*O bialu egbu anyi gbue onwe ya*

Wicked plans designed to harm the innocent are to have boomerang effect

*Ile oma ka ejuna ji agan'ogwu*

We achieve much progress by being good, kind and gentle

*Ife anyi ga-eli bia, nke ga eli anyi abiana*

We pray for the good things of life and abhor evil tendencies

*Izu gbajulugwo o kaalu nti*

Secrets and malevolent plants at some point in time, may be revealed

*Ututu tutauta ife*

May today be blessed with lots of good luck

*Onye welu ututu tutuba otutujue akpa*

If you start early enough to toil, you will achieve a lot by the end of the day"

### **The Ekpe Society**

Ekpe society is a powerful fraternity, which in the olden days, served as a law making body in certain Igbo communities and controlled civil matters and trade. The Ekpe is not only used by the Igbos, but by the Ekoi (Okoyong), Efik, Ibibio, Eket and Annang. Despite the fact that only a handful of Igbo communities practice the Ekpe, (Ututu, Arochukwu, Arondizuogu, Ihechiow), it still plays a strong cultural and political role in these societies. The Ekpos or "spirits" in Ibibio were meant to represent the spirit of the ancestors and they presided over events such as the New Yam Festival and some important burials. It is celebrated by the Igbos in Imo, Abia and Ebonyi. During the festivals, Ekpo masquerades chase women and young children, but never men.

In communing with the spirits during the celebration, drinks are poured in the form of libation and chants made, believed to be understood and listened to by the spirits and ancestors.

### **Okorosha Festival**

Closely related to the Ekpe festival is the Okorosha festival, celebrated by some communities in Imo State. Among other significant features, Okorosha is used to discipline young people by their parents, that is, disobedient children are reported to Okorosha, which will in turn flog the child as a corrective measure. Its period is used as a time of discipline and good conduct for young people. It is an annual celebration, usually preceded by some traditional rites. First is "Ito Nkwa", a

form of traditional worship done at night, twelve days to the commencement of Okorosha festival. It involves the beating of traditional drums and sounds, special dances and pronouncements by initiated members and the traditional holder of the Ofo, referred to as Isi Owu. It is done at the residence of the Title holder (Onye isi Owu). Only the initiated can attend or participate in Ito Nkwa. It is a night affair. Eight days after the Ito Nkwa comes an open celebration, called Igba Owu. Owu is a special masquerade dance preceding Okorosha emergence. It is the same kind of dance displayed in the residence of the Title holder that is then done in the open, but this time, the Owu (masquerades) climb an elevated stick, specially carved for the purpose. They wear masks and are not allowed to fall from the thin sticks. Any Masquerade that falls on the ground is fined. Exactly four days after the Owu outing, the Okorosha masquerades appear. They are in different forms: Omu, Udo, Ota Okpukpu, Isi Obeli, etc. They come out daily, except on Nkwo market days and keep the communities charged, for about one month; chasing and flogging little children, single women and the uninitiated. At night, no woman or uninitiated moves freely, without a man escorting her and announcing with a loud voice that a woman is coming. On the last (agreed day), the masquerades sing, dance and move in an organized manner, village by village to the central market square, marking the end of the festival for the year. Immediately after the final outing, some gun shots are heard and another native drum is displayed for wrestling, while the new yam festival is done, four days after the final outing of the Okorosha. Any masquerade seen anywhere after the final market outing is fined heavily. Okorosha masquerades speak a special language, believed to be taught by spirits. Their music also sounds mundane and not easily understood, except by the initiated. The Ofo holder(s) commune with the spirits at every stage of the celebration, using Kolanut, drinks and in some cases, blood of animals. They use incantations. Communities in Imo known for Okorochocha festival include, but not limited to: Izombe, Awa, Ejemekwuru, Agwa, Orsu, Ngbele, and Nkwessi, all in Oguta Local Government Area and Ogbaku and Umunoha, in Mbaitoli Local Government Area, among others. It is believed that each year the gods are happy with the celebration(s), the yam harvest for that year will be bountiful (Figure 1). Unfortunately, none of the practices is documented, but transmitted by way of mouth from one generation to another.

### **Purpose of incantation**

In Igbo tradition, incantation is the secret of all ways of giving or practicing traditional medicine. It is used for a number of purposes. There is incantation for the purpose of love. There is also incantation in some localities, such as Umunoha in Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo

State, used for the purposes of imprisoning all mosquitoes and stop them from biting the one who has recited it.

Konkwo (1997) gave a good example as cited below:

**a. N'aha Olisa bi n'igwe, anwu nta, ihe ndi ozo na-ata ata**

'In the name of God, mosquito, biting ant, biting ant that flies'

**b. Ihe nwuru anwu anwuola. Mechie onu**

'What is dead, is died, just keep quite'

**c. Ina ata mmadu, na-ata mmadu, ma n'ututu**

'Just biting, biting, biting, even in the morning'

Incantation is also used for the purpose of becoming invisible. When someone recites the incantation or holds its charm, nobody will see him/her. This type of incantation has both merits and demerits in Igbo culture.

While it is efficacious in a lot of cases, sometimes, it could disappoint the person. Traditional/Native doctors, herbalists and other traditional workers use incantations for their daily activities. Using certain key words, they make pronouncements that they expect the spirits to honor, following some supernatural guidance. Many people use it for good performances, while others use it for bad practices, particularly thieves and those who engage in social vices.

Incantation is also performed for the purpose of easy delivery. A pregnant woman recites certain incantations for easy delivery. Incantation is used for many purposes, and it is believed to be very effective for those that use it, especially, in the traditional Igbo society.

### **Conclusion**

The traditional Igbo society employs the use of incantations in communication with the spirits and the dead. This is often offered in the form of prayers for favour and action from the gods of the land and indeed, the Supreme Being. It is indeed, part of the culture of the traditional Igbo society and has survived from one generation to another. It was discovered that most of the cultural displays of the Igbo society employ incantations in communicating with spirits. It was also found out that none of the practices, prayers, pronouncements or doctrines is written down anywhere. This is a major challenge, as they are susceptible to adulteration and alterations. Also, some parts of the doctrines and traditional exercises in Igbo traditional society appear fetish and offend the belief of some religions, especially, Christianity. This is a major challenge that has negatively affected their preservations. Not too many people are proud to identify with some of the practices as a result of this challenge. In fact, many have argued that most of the cultural practices suggest idol worship, a



**Figure 1.** Okorosha festival of Ezeoji Amaigbo, Imo state. Credit: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

development that has made it difficult for many, especially the younger generation to embrace them. This spells doom for the Igbo race, as a greater percentage of its culture is at the verge of extinction. Most of the cultural practices that help to preserve morality, etiquette, discipline and the peoples' heritage are presently at risk.

The extinction of a people's culture is as good as the extinction of the people themselves. Even the culture of hard work and uprightness is gradually disappearing. What about language? It is in the same truck of extinction (Figure 2). The Igbo race is therefore endangered, and something must be done very urgently



**Figure 2.** Igbo Religion | Odinani: The Sacred Arts & Sciences of the Igbo people. Source: Google.com.

to save the situation.

### Recommendations

In view of the shortcomings and challenges identified, the following recommendations are made to help save the situation:

While some aspects of the cultural practices may appear fetish, several others are purely traditional. It is therefore recommended that the parts of the tradition that contradict/offend other faiths be dropped.

There is the need for a state of emergency to be declared by the political, traditional class and elites of Igbo extraction on the restoration of Igbo traditional practices.

Political office holders must desist from unduly interfering in traditional issues, but allow traditional institutions to operate and satisfy the purposes for which they exist.

There is need for stakeholders' engagement(s) on the preservation of the people's culture and values.

Certain aspects of the culture must be made compulsory. For instance, teaching/learning of Igbo language in schools should be compulsory in all Igbo speaking states of Nigeria.

There is need for documentation of the people's cultural practices to secure and safeguard their sanctity and save them from arbitrary distortion.

Ultimately, the people's way of life should not be extinguished. Some parts of the tradition may contradict the modern day style of worship-Christianity, but are even promoted by a lot of Christians themselves. A people's culture is their life, their inheritance and their strength. Reviewing some aspects of the culture may be necessary, but abolishing them will be counterproductive, as it may ruin the people's values.

### Conflict of interest

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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