

## **Discursive Construction of Hegemonic Masculinities and the Trivialisation of Women in the Bukusu *khulicha* as a Post Circumcision Ritual**

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**Abstract:** Initiation among the *Bukusu* community in Kenya, which involves a ritual called *khulicha*, is fundamental to human growth and development. Initiation involves undergoing a set of rites to start a new phase in life. It fundamentally has to do with transformation; and has been a central component of African cultures. The ritual *khulicha* is a highly respected and well organised ritual in *Bukusu* community performed after circumcision or the healing period. In this ritual, boys are initiated into the secret ways of the community by male facilitators. Women and girls are not supposed to know the secrets of the community. The boys are specially instructed on the expectations of the community during *khulicha*. They are assigned duties so that in the absence of the father, they can take over the leadership of the family. They must not, after initiation, be seen performing 'female chores'. Through this ritual, the male members become weavers of hegemonic masculinity's fabric and its organising intellectuals. They create, regulate and perpetuate cultural ideals that stabilise a structure of male dominance and female oppression in community. The dominant position of men and subordination of women in the society requires a critical investigation; and thus was the task of the study from which this article was obtained. Using the Discourse Historical Approach, which is a theory and an analytical tool, the study sought to establish how hegemonic masculinities self-manifest in *khulicha* ritual; identify the cultural ideologies that trivialise women and, the reasons for the exclusion of women in the *khulicha* ritual. The findings revealed that discriminatory and cultural ideologies that trivialise women do exist in the *Bukusu khulicha* ritual.

**Keywords:** Hegemonic masculinity, Ritual, Ideology, *khulicha*.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **The Ritual *khulicha***

*Khulicha*, among the *Bukusu* community of Western Kenya, is an initiation into the secret ways of the community. It is a post circumcision ritual that plays an important role among the *Bukusu* community. During this ritual, the boys are initiated into the secret ways of the community. No woman is allowed to access this ritual site. The boys are told to keep off the female company as they are seen as the head of the family [1]. Patriarchal control is asserted to secure control of the families. This ritual is more than a physical event. It involves the totality of the body, soul and mind; it involves the whole person. Through *khulicha* ritual the character of the boy is strengthened to enable him face adult life. It is believed that adult life is difficult and the ritual plays instructive and formative roles by perpetuating community's knowledge, values, solidarity and tradition. During *khulicha*, the boys are taken to the forest, which symbolizes a place of hardship. The boys and the men light fire signifying that the boys were previously leading an easy life, but now there is fire out there which they must face and subdue. It is from then the responsibility of the initiated boys to take their roles

and be independent. The culmination of the ritual *khulicha* as the rite of passage is sealed with boys' fight with the leopard to prove their worth and the boys are elated at being accepted into manhood. Fighting the leopard is re-defining the *Bukusu* culture, which is pegged on proving manhood. Only a section of the community access the site, no woman should have access; they are purportedly outsiders.

This paper was obtained from a study of this post circumcision ritual among the *Bukusu* community in Kenya. To obtain data for the study, a sample of fifteen men, eight women and seven boys were selected using purposive sampling techniques. Women play marginal roles in this ritual because of the constraints imposed on them by culture. The women were selected to take part in the interviews because the researcher wanted to listen to their perspective on their position in society. This was an ethnographic study, which is discovery oriented to help understand people's views of their world. *khulicha* ritual was sampled because it is a highly respected and well organised ritual in the community. The main tools of data collection were observation, field notes and interviews. The data

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constituted texts for analysis to reveal hegemonic masculinities. Data was analysed using the discourse historical approach which is both a theory and a method.

The views of men, women and boys were collected that revealed how hegemonic masculinities manifest themselves in *khulichha* ritual. Using DHA, the study sought to capture the views of *Bukusu* women as located in *khulichha* ritual practice of the *Bukusu* people. The discourse historical approach is committed to Critical Discourse Analysis. It embraces three interconnected aspects [2]: Text, social diagnostic critique, and the prognostic critique. One distinguishing feature of DHA is that it follows the principle of triangulation. It endeavours to work with different approaches on the basis of a variety of empirical data as well as background information. Further it analyses the historical dimension of discursive actions by exploring the ways in which particular genres of discourse are subject to diachronic change [3]. Finally, it integrates social theories to be able to explain context. Thus, triangulation approach takes into account four levels:

- (i) The immediate language or text, internal co-text.
- (ii) The inter-textual and inter-discursive relationship between utterances.
- (iii) The extra linguistic, social/sociological variables and institutional frames of a specific context of situation.
- (iv) The broader sociopolitical and historical contexts which the discursive practices are embedded in and related to.

This theory's tenets provides the basis for the analysis of the different linguistic or rhetorical means by which, women in *Bukusu* community are discriminated against. For example, how are women referred to linguistically in ritual discourse? What traits, qualities, characteristics, features, are attributed to them? By means of what arguments do specific persons, try to justify and legitimize the discrimination, suppression and exploitation of women? Who talks? Who has power? What ideologies do men use to retain power?

### **Ritual Discourse; Value and Role**

Ritual discourse is an important factor because it relates to gender and discourse. The political, economic, social-cultural and psychological factors attached to the power of men in relation to women, means that women continue to be discriminated against. Discriminatory messages in ritual practices as far as gender issues are concerned are often taken for granted. People construct knowledge between them through the daily interactions. Thus, our current accepted ways of understanding the world, is a product not of objective observation of the world, but of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged

with each other [4]. Ritual is a special type of social behaviour functionally connected to the social structure of society, and is instrumental for the transmission of cultural values. Ritual is an instrument for the regulation of human relationships.

During rituals, participants do not act independently but are bound by tradition or the will of non-human agencies. Actors take on a different attitude during a ritual: ritual commitment. These persons in whom the authority is vested by the community can exercise the authority because of their status in the community. This does not invoke any justification although they may choose to provide reasons or arguments for their representation. Ritual then is linked to the human desire for distinction. To achieve this, a fundamental mechanism in an assertion of identity is to cause 'misrecognition' of its purpose. This means that the participants, be they performers or audience, are usually unaware of what a ritual really does. People cannot bear too much reality. They prefer to 'deceive' themselves and each other into thinking that what is at stake is the orthodoxy of their doctrine, the propriety of their conduct, and the purity of the community. Ritual is embedded in human disposition.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity**

Hegemony is the power or dominance that one social group holds over others. Hegemony is dominance and subordination in the field of relations structured by power. But hegemony is more than social power itself; it is a method for gaining and maintaining power [5]. Gramsci's hegemony theory [6] connects ideological representation to culture. Hegemony requires that ideological assertions become self evident cultural assumptions. Its effectiveness depends on subordinated people's accepting the dominant ideology as 'normal reality or common sense in the forms of experience and consciousness' [7]. Because ritual practices are thoroughly integrated into the everyday realities of *Bukusu* community, the social influence exerted is not always recognised, discussed or criticised. Hegemony therefore, can easily go undetected.

Hegemony implies a willing agreement by people to be governed by principles, rules and laws they believe operate in their best interests, even though in actual practice they may not. Social consent can be a more effective means of control than coercion or force. Relationships between and among the major information- diffusing, socialising agencies of a society, such as the ritual *khulichha* among the *Bukusu*, and the interacting cumulative, socially accepted ideological orientations they create and sustain is the essence of hegemony.

Williams and Hall [8], state that hegemony is fragile. It requires renewal and modification through the assertion and reassertion of power. Hall suggests that 'it

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is crucial to the concept that hegemony is not a 'given and permanent state of affairs, but it has to be actively won and secured; it can also be lost' [9], so ideological work is the winning and securing hegemony over time. However, hegemony fails when dominant ideology is weaker than social resistance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following subsections, we analyse the manifestation of hegemonic masculinities, the gendering of roles, power and equality and ideological connotations in the ritual *khulicha*. Masculinities are configurations of practices that are accomplished in social interaction. The construction of masculinities rests upon specific, culturally and historically located embodied social actions such as *khulicha*. *khulicha* is a post circumcision ritual which means initiation into the secret ways of the community. We look at initiation into manhood, exclusion of women, trivialization of women, the home coming songs, the role of a woman and the representation of *Bukusu* women. In these subsections, we present the discursive construction of masculinity in *khulicha* ritual.

### Initiation into Manhood

To become a man in *Bukusu* community, a boy must undergo circumcision: this entails enduring pain, perseverance and bravery. These are markers of masculinity. After circumcision, several other rituals, among them *khulicha*, are performed to mark the transition period. During *khulicha* the initiates go into seclusion. During the seclusion period, the boys are given instructions that would ensure that they are reasonable, patient and strong hearted. The opposite are characteristics of women.

Ritual for boys in *Bukusu* community is significant in a number of ways: *Khulicha* is a tradition which must be upheld by all; it has been there since time immemorial; is has been handed down from one generation to another; failure to perform it may lead to misfortunes such as: failure to marry or to get children. Children are highly valued in *Bukusu* community. During ritual, the boys are assigned duties; in the absence of the older people, they may take on leadership in their homes. These are strategies aimed to serve in various ways to legitimize and enact the distinctions of 'the other', for example, by dominating the women, and by excluding them from certain social activities. These attitudes and beliefs are stored in children's memory structures which are initially acquired during socialization.

The main objective in this ritual is to make the distance towards out-groups and the establishment of in- group solidarity. The community rationalizes and justifies discriminatory acts against women. The women are dominated, differentiated and distanced from. The men produce and reproduce discriminatory messages

against women which are then implemented and enacted in social action. Women are considered as mentally immature; they are despised, and they willingly accept their suppression and exploitation by men. Men advance the prejudice that they are important human beings who form the 'insiders' of *Bukusu* community.

The men in *Bukusu* community who wield power over the women employ collective symbols to stigmatize and exclude the women whom they refer to as the out- group. Ritual discourse determines actions and possesses power. This constitutes reality. The gendering of roles is tied to power and hegemony.

### Exclusion of Women

The ritual *khulicha* is performed by men for boys. Women are completely absent. The social actor's exclusion of women from inclusion in the linguistic representations can serve many different psychological, social and political purposes or interests, [10]. Linguistic exclusion is not only strategically employed to conceal persons responsible for discriminatory activities, it has clearly discriminating effects. The exclusion of women in the ritual *khulicha* would be interpreted to mean they are neglected, and this leads much to, actual disadvantaging of women in all community's domains.

In this ritual, the women are completely missing in action. The argument is that boys are taught by men and girls by women because roles for both male and female are different, and thus perpetuated to eternity. Though the place of a woman in this community is in the kitchen, during *khulicha*, it is the men who cook. This is a custom that has been handed down from generation to generation. A man initiates a man; a woman has no role because she belongs to another clan; she is not a relative, therefore cannot be initiated into the community's ways.

During *khulicha* the boy is told to 'step out' to venture into the world. It is always in the interests of the dominant groups if the minor group can accept their position as an ideological imperative; that is the way things should be. Power structures tend to be institutionalized and fixed by customs and laws, which encourage people to behave in certain ways and identify with certain groups [11]. Although discourse may not be the only factor in the establishment and maintenance of dominant groups, there is no doubt that dominance is practiced and reproduced through language. Dominance has been defined as 'the exercise of social powers by institutions or groups that result in social inequality, including political, cultural, and gender inequality [12].

In the analysis, focus was on the significance of language in classifying people with respect to their place in power structures and how powerful groups

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(read men), sometimes with the tacit 'co-operation' of less powerful (read women), can use language to maintain inequality [11].

### **Trivialisation of Women in the Dance**

The dance is performed on the arrival of the candidates from the river. It is at the river that the boys are initiated into the secret ways of the community. They use biblical allusion to argue that even John baptized people in the river when being born again, so *khulich*a is baptism; initiation into the secret ways of the clan.

From the river they come home to feed and to allow any other persons to take part. Everyone is allowed to take part in the dance including the women. One may choose to dance naked. At this juncture, we provide a liminal model of passage rites as earlier proposed by [13]. Passage rites in *Bukusu* community consist of three stages. First, the boys are separated from the symbolic and social structures which normally surround them. Second, the boys pass through liminal phase, in which a series of new and powerful symbols are presented to them for reflection and consideration; and finally, the boys are aggregated back into the social structure, now in new status.

In the second phase, *khulich*a usually involves several boys at once. Symbols are presented in the form of masks, objects or behaviors by already initiated men. All these serve as objects of thought. For example, dancing naked by mixed adults; encouraging reflection on sexuality. The sudden emergence of women in the dance, dancing provocatively and suggestively, focuses attention on the role of a woman- that of bearing children and, thus ultimately the reasons and purposes of the dance promote conformity to societal requirements.

There are also the socio-political implications of the ritual dance. Ritual does produce conformity through the illusion of free choice but at the same time allows particular groups in particular historical situations to manipulate symbols to their own advantage serving the purposes of established authority. The ritual *khulich*a is a technique of mystification by which cultural authority can be produced and reproduced and by having the participants accept these authority structures as natural, given and ideal. These then emphasize the rightness of hegemonic discourses of authority.

In the ritual discourse, there are those who create authority structures. These are the elders, who to some degree know that these structures are merely inventions, and then there are those who are simply slates inscribed upon by such authority structures through ritual. Both are subject to what they take to be given structures and traditions. Presumably, people are

entirely controlled and dominated by what they are told, and never think flexibly. Creativity is denied in ritual by the hegemonic discourse. The boys are given instructions that have been handed down from one generation to the next.

According to the 'hydraulic' theory the dance (carnivals) acts as valves, allowing participants to 'blow off steam'. By permitting marginal elements of society like the women and all, to dance out their frustrations, authorities (men & the elders) retain control of real power and maintain the stability of those they dominate. Real challenge or engagement with social rules is annulled because it doesn't count in ritual space [14].

The final phase which is aggregation back into the social structure begins with markers of new status. The boys are presented to the relevant communities; initiates and society at large, and then dressed in men's clothing, presented to the men who welcome them, and depart to be greeted by the women of the community as men rather than boys. When the elders are walking and conducting the ritual, the women are locked out completely. So the inclusion of women in the dance and in the receiving of young men, have a disguising, relativising or averting function [15]. It hides the fact that a specific treatment only concerns a subgroup of the persons and pretends there is equal treatment, whereas inequalities and injustices remain in effect.

### **The Home Coming Songs**

The songs are sung to those young people who have undergone the ritual and have been given the responsibility to care for the entire community. In their new status, they can now have their own families and care for them. Whatever the instructions they are given during *khulich*a are to be kept secretly; they are not to be talked about in public and especially to those people who do not belong to the community of *khulich*a.

#### **Song 1. Eng'uneng'ene**

*The power of the penis*

*Where are the women to come and dance*

*The penis has been sharpened.*

The first song called *Eng'uneng'ene* means, the women are waiting for the power of the penis that has been sharpened. The soloist asks, 'where is Margaret to come and shake the pelvis?' The song aptly captures the role of a woman in the community; that of giving birth. It is this song which the people dance to; it is a cultural dance which must be observed. Failure to dance to it may bring bad omen such as, the boys not being able to marry or to get children in marriage. This is a tradition that has been handed down from generation to generation and must be obeyed. The women in *Bukusu* community have accepted their role; it is good, they like it. They dance provocatively to the song; suggestively requesting the men to come and make them get more children. However, they shouldn't

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know the secrets of the clan. Their work is to cook and give birth.

When asked to take on men's roles, the women say they would do so very well; that their knowledge of the world is vast and apt. They are analytical and highly effective but the men wouldn't allow them to be at the helm of leadership; things can go wrong, so they accept their position.

### Song 2 **Chebotalang'i**

*Marinda Wandia x3*  
*In praise of the leopard group*  
*Our leopard x3*  
*In praise of the leopard*  
*Our culture x3*

The second song is called '*Chebotalang'i*'- meaning 'taming the leopard'. The song is sung by both the young men and the older men to and from the river. The song praises the communities that practice the ritual *khulicha* showing that they are superior compared to other communities that do not perform this ritual. It also teaches the young men to be courageous and to meet all the challenges of the world without fear. Since they have fought and tamed the leopard, they mock and invite the non-*khulicha* communities to join them. The song is symbolic of their group identity: the people of the leopard (*ingwe*). The boys are told to be courageous like their fathers.

In these songs we note the prejudices and stereotypes. Prejudices are mental states defined as negative attitudes towards social groups. A stereotype is a verbal expression of a certain conviction or belief directed towards a social group. The stereotype is an element of common knowledge shared in a particular culture. We see the *Bukusu khulicha* group form a judgment that attributes particular qualities or behavioral patterns to certain groups of persons [16]. Prejudices and stereotypes have a cognitive linguistic orientating function. They simplify the communication within one's group, strengthen the sense of belonging and delineate the out group. Argumentation strategies are used in the songs to represent positive- self and negative- other.

### **The Role of a Woman**

The responses of the men we interviewed revealed that, the role of the woman was strictly confined to the domestic spheres, and to the service of men. Majority of the men's responses revealed that marriage for a woman was obligatory. For one to be considered as an elder in Bukusu community, he must be married. Therefore, women provide a license for men to ascend to leadership positions. Many wives are viewed as an asset because they can provide labor in the men's farms. If a man can manage several wives, it is considered that he is a real man. Thus, a man who has

attained the age of marriage is expected to marry, and a successful marriage is highly respected because this gives license to a man to become a leader. In case of political leadership, many women presuppose many votes.

Having many wives, and by extension many children especially the girls is an assurance of wealth to the man: This is because when the girls get married, the man is able to fetch much wealth in form of dowry.

The woman is also expected to perform household labour. Research reveals that women historically, have shouldered the responsibility for doing household labour. Even though in recent decades women have entered the paid labour force, men in *Bukusu* community continue to do significantly less house work. In their role to give birth, women are also expected to nurture the children. Boys are raised to expect their mothers to wait on them and nurture them, and girls are raised to help their mothers perform the endless family work that is necessary for maintaining homes and raising children.

After *khulicha* ritual, many young men, having been initiated into men, come back to the family life with a sense of masculine entitlement, expecting to be served by women. If they fail to get these services, men have been expected to keep women in place, with the threat and use of physical force; to the extent that this expectation is normalized as a symbol of masculinity. Kaufman [17] notes that, 'all women, directly or indirectly, experience at least the potential of domination, violence, coercion and harassment at the hands of men'. The idea of home is in the rural homestead created by the labor of women under the jurisdiction of male headship and chiefly power. This domestication of women is an essential strategy to keep them under control.

We also note that, cattle were the means by which men acquired and accumulated the labour power of women. Cattle were given or pledged by the husbands to the girl's father in exchange for a woman's productive capacity in agriculture and her productive capacity to create future labourers. In this way, cattle increased the social power of the men [18].

### **Representation of a Bukusu Woman in khulicha**

Since women are invisible in the ritual *khulicha*, their representations are revealed only in interviews. Their ideological representation positions women as aliens, immature, unreliable and problematic. Social representations have a historical dimension. They are the product of a whole sequence of elaborations and of changes which occur in the course of time and are the achievement of successive generations [19]. The ideological discursive representation of a Bukusu woman is the means by which hegemonic symbolic

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forms circulate in *Bukusu* community. Women in this community have no bargaining power within the household, especially in family decision making. They mostly depend on men hence less self esteem and less participation in social and economic matters outside the home [20].

The views of the majority of men who were interviewed showed that a *Bukusu* woman is immature, passive, problematic and therefore a target of constant intervention. Women carry out their duties under strict supervision from the men. Women are potential targets of systematic forms of discrimination and domination by men. That a woman should not handle important matters in the community is one of the oldest cultural prescriptions of the *Bukusu* community. The desire by men is to continuously control women's labour.

Based on these factors, women are viewed as aliens in *Bukusu* community and therefore, should not be allowed access to the secret ways of the community. In the *Bukusu* ritual *khulichha* women are left out, they are missing in action. For these reasons, boys and girls are raised differently from the beginning of their lives: Masculine ideas project boys out of and away from the feminine and the domestic sphere. Boys and men inhabit the public sphere and girls and women the private.

The ideology of separate spheres has remained resistant to change in *Bukusu* community. Hughes [21] argues that most societies continue to subscribe to the notion that men and women have distinctly different and generally opposite, psychological and behavioral tendencies. Taken as a whole, the mandate for boys to be not feminine is a mandate that drives them away from family relations, particularly, relations with their mothers [22]. This cultural mandate can cause problems for them when they mature into men; having little ideological precedent for living harmoniously in a family environment predicated on ideals of democratic sharing.

Relying on the ideology of separate spheres, families continue to raise children to be masculine or feminine. By institutionalizing gender differences, gender hierarchy is also institutionalized and also the power of men, who have historically shaped institutions to reflect their own interests. According to Kaufman [23], "in a world dominated by men, the world of men, is by definition a world of power".

Different treatment of boys and girls based on their sex is a product of the behavior of gendered adults, and institutionalized expectations about gender derived from society as a whole. The result of this indoctrination is that, as they become developmentally able, boys and girls incorporate the gendered messages and scripts that adults have communicated to them into

their own age appropriate gender schema. A gender schema predisposes a person to see the world in terms of two defined opposites- male and female, masculine and feminine. Children then go about recreating a world in which boys/ men and girls/ women are not just different but polar opposites, and where boys/ men are generally powerful and privileged.

One elder argued that, the *Bukusu* people do not know where the woman came from; that man fell asleep, and when he woke up, he saw someone lying beside him, who was totally different from him in appearance. For this reason, a woman is not to be trusted and should not be allowed to lead because they don't know where she came from; the reason why they confine her in the domestic sphere to take care of the home. *Bukusu* elders are basically men. Traditionally, women have been excluded from viable positions in the society, and women have to challenge this exclusion by redefining new femininity.

Patriarchal control is asserted to secure control of the rural homestead. Man is seen as the head of the family. Maintaining customary power involves the control of African women in the domestic sphere. From the point of view of the DHA, the discursive construction of the differences between men and women leads to political and social exclusion of women as a sub-group from the public sphere.

## CONCLUSION

All human actions are socially constructed, based on beliefs and shaped by language [24]. People therefore do not always need to engage in an active cognitive search for explanations for all forms of behavior. Instead, they evoke their socialized processing or social representations for expected and normative behavior [19]. Life and daily living are about change-about things happening, about creativity and intelligence at work in the space left open by the incomplete hold of ideologies and institutions [25-26]. Purposes are discursively constructed in social practices [27]. The discursive construction of purpose is closely related to the discursive construction of legitimation, [28-29]. Legitimation is discursively constructed in order to explain why social practices exist and why they take the forms they do. Masculine domination is open to challenge and requires considerable effort to maintain. There exists considerable evidence that hegemonic masculinity is not a self producing form. To sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women [30].

In *khulichha* ritual, a systematic discrimination of persons based on sex is explicitly evident. The pursuit of identity is the pursuit of power, honour, and prestige which in *Bukusu* community is the prerogative of men. Maintaining customary power involves the control of the *Bukusu* women in the domestic sphere.

Women are valued for their labour within the family and extended community. Women anchor the community in a material production and reproductive capacity as mothers, wives and keepers of the home; the place of belonging and for socialization of children. In addition, women are the social group whose subjugation by husbands and fathers give shape to the expectations of future privileges imagined by the young men.

Women in *Bukusu* community are relegated to lower social position. Their position is and continues to be stereotyped as inferior to that of men. Authority for a woman may help challenge the foundation of prevailing sexual division of labour and economic differentiation. Most women in *Bukusu* community have accepted their position, however, they can challenge individuals and institutions that inhibit their self interest and deny them authority. There is need to help young men to question traditional norms related to manhood. It is desirable to shift modalities of ritual discourse from reproductive to transformational. The worrying trend in *Bukusu* rituals is the acceptance, the silence and the tolerance of discriminatory utterances against women by many social actors. African women need to believe in themselves, challenge themselves and rally together to effect change. Some women are so ignorant that they criticize those who try to effect change. Others often want to portray themselves as good, potential or actual wives by adopting meek and submissive ways of behaving. There is need to adopt new ways of bringing up the children. In addition, only education can correct such ignorance.

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