

# **Using the Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture**

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*The article highlights the realities and dynamics facing researchers researching indigenous African culture. The cultural aspirations, understandings, and practices of African indigenous people should position researchers to implement and organize the research process. Suggestions are also made for implementing the “Afrocentric method,” and how to use African indigenous culture as a foundation for the Afrocentric method. The intent of this article is to stimulate enlightened discussion about the definition, mechanisms, and purpose of the Afrocentric method as an appropriate research method for indigenous African culture and how it can be used as a complement to qualitative research methods. Key Words: Afrocentric Method, Indigenous African Culture, Indigenous Knowledge, African Centred Research, Collective Identity, Holistic Orientation, and Ubuntu*

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## **Introduction**

Since colonial invasions, African indigenous culture has weathered rapid change. Many researchers made real attempts to get inside the African culture, but even so, there was a tendency to see culture in terms of the coloniser’s precepts and to assess educational needs in terms of the coloniser’s agenda. When establishing formal education there was no adequate reference to the indigenous education that Africans already had or to the depth of the ancestral opinions that influenced African thinking. Even at present, researchers who are interested in indigenous culture and education have made small reference in assessing change to the extent in which African values have survived, or of the extent to which these values had continued to influence African researchers’ actions at different points in time. It is important that researchers remind themselves that much of the literature on African culture and education can be ideologically traced back to the emergence of “knowledge” about indigenous peoples in the context of European imperialism and expansion. In brief, Africans were often judged in European contexts and not in terms of their own.

Hence, the following questions are asked: How can the Afrocentric method as advanced by Asante (1987, 1988, 1990, 1995) be used in researching African indigenous culture and can African research refrain from sticking to the pathways mapped out by the colonial or neo-colonial experts? The purpose of this article is to show ways that the Afrocentric method can be used for researching indigenous culture.

As an African in South Africa I have received education in a country that has openly marginalised African indigenous knowledge. Now as a democratic country South Africa is engaged in the unfolding process of bringing African indigenous knowledge

systems into focus as a legitimate field of academic enquiry in its own right. I have attended several conferences and workshops in South Africa where debates and issues have become critical and intense regarding conceptual frameworks and methodological procedures, which the indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) field presents. It is in this light that I explore the Afrocentric method as an alternative method to study IKS.

### **The Afrocentric Paradigm Unpacked**

The Afrocentric method is derived from the Afrocentric paradigm which deals with the question of African identity from the perspective of African people as centred, located, oriented, and grounded. This idea has been named "Afrocentricity" by Molefe Asante (1987) in order to convey the profound need for African people to be re-located historically, economically, socially, politically, and philosophically. He explained Afrocentricity as follows:

To say that we are decentred means essentially that we have lost our own cultural footing and become other than our cultural and political origins, dis-located and dis-oriented. We are essentially insane, that is, living an absurdity from which we will never be able to free our minds until we return to the source. Afrocentricity as a theory of change intends to re-locate the African person as subject. . . . As a pan-African idea, Afrocentricity becomes the key to the proper education of children and the essence of an African cultural revival and, indeed, survival. (Asante, 1995, p. 1)

Afrocentricity is therefore, a philosophical and theoretical paradigm whose origins are attributed to Asante's works *Afrocentricity* (1988), *The Afrocentric Idea* (1987), and *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (1990). These books form the essential core of the idea that interpretation and explanation based on the role of Africans as subjects is most consistent with reality. It became a growing intellectual idea in the 1980s as scores of African American and African scholars adopted an Afrocentric orientation to data. Afrocentricity is generally opposed to theories that "dislocate" Africans in the periphery of human thought and experience.

From a research point of view Asante argues that Afrocentricity can have a significant impact upon the way African researchers view their identity, specifically considering the African people as centred, located, oriented, and grounded. Afrocentricity is therefore a philosophical and theoretical perspective that when applied to research can form the essential core of the idea. In terms of research outcomes the issue of cultural location takes precedence over the topic or the data under consideration. The argument is that Africans have been moved off of social, political, philosophical, and economic terms for half a millenium. Consequently it becomes necessary to examine all data from the standpoint of Africans as subjects and human agents rather than as objects in a European frame of reference. Of course, this means that Afrocentricity has implications for indigenous African culture. Here, the motifs of locations and constituents of centredness or de-centredness become important when using the Afrocentric method.

The Afrocentric method suggests cultural and social immersion as opposed to scientific distance as the best approach to understand African phenomena. This means

that the researcher must have some familiarity with history, language, philosophy, and myths of the people under study. This point takes on a normative and cultural dimension as researchers cannot be reduced to merely the collection and production of value-free scientific knowledge. The concept becomes a way of linking the purpose of research to the very discourse that emerges and is legitimized from within the African framework. Such a position is critical in Africa as researchers may misrepresent indigenous cultural practices and thus continue to perpetuate myths about the indigenous African culture.

Thus the Afrocentric paradigm locates research from an African viewpoint and creates Africa's own intellectual perspective. It focuses on Africa as the cultural centre for the study of African experiences and interprets research data from an African perspective. However, this perspective should be understood in the context of multicultural realities of South Africa, as the African paradigm serves as a liberating intellectual movement towards a pluriversal perspective in research. Afrocentrists argue for pluralism in philosophical views without hierarchy. A fundamental aim of Afrocentricity is that all cultural centers must be respected. "Afrocentricity is not color-conscious, it is not a matter of color but of culture that matters in the orientation to centeredness" (Asante, 1995, p. 3). Metaphors of location and dislocation are the principal tools of analysis as research situations and researchers are seen as displaying various forms of centeredness. To be centered is to be located as an agent instead of as "the Other." Such a critical shift in thinking means that the Afrocentric perspective provides new insights and dimensions in the understanding of African indigenous culture, in a multicultural context.

Hountondji (1997) has also articulated the importance of an African perspective to research. He states that the study of traditional knowledge as a component of African culture has direct implications for the future development of generations of researchers in this continent. The time has come to conduct a responsible identification of African method that will constitute the ground frame for all research projects aspiring to be indigenous. Hountondji (1997) informs us that research on indigenous African culture has typically addressed the concerns of the researcher (both Western researchers and African researchers trained in Western methodologies) and ignored the African point of view. He further argues that the findings of researchers reflect the way they approach and assess African indigenous knowledge and know-how. It is therefore important to distinguish between a general corpus of knowledge and particular research methods, as it seems patently absurd to study indigenous knowledge while staying hooked on external methodologies. It is also important that we seek principles that will underline methods for researching indigenous knowledge.

The principles underlying this paradigm are in line with the qualitative research, which researchers should actively be involved in to produce knowledge suited to the cultural and social context in which they operate. In essence, this implies that the researcher does not attempt to appear as an invisible anonymous voice of authority, but as a real historical individual with concrete specific desires and interests (Harding as cited in Van Wyk, 1996). The researcher becomes immersed in the situation and the phenomenon examined (Tabet, 1997). The researcher is more concerned with an understanding of the social phenomenon from the actor's perspective, through their participation in the lives of the actors (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In such research, the researcher empathizes and identifies with the people being studied in order to understand how they see things.

By trying to understand the actor's point of view the researcher is attempting to answer questions regarding cultural specificity, researcher judgement, and how the researcher's experiences and histories relate to the research process itself. The purpose is to reduce researcher imposition in order for research to meet and work within, and for, the interests and concerns of the research participants; within their own definitions of self-determination (Bishop, 1998). Thus the Afrocentric paradigm challenges the dominant world-view of research and the production of knowledge by avoiding a mode of technocratic rationality that restricts diversity in terms of research methods. The paradigm operates from the notion that researchers come from different histories, have different experiences, linguistic practices, cultures, and talents. As in qualitative research, it is important to know what personal connections the researcher has to the people or topic being studied. Mutema (2003) warns that although IKS is situated knowledge, the researcher does not necessarily have to be indigenous to understand IKS. Inversely, the indigenous African researcher although privileged with tools of language and proximity to the experiences of indigenous communities, should not assume a privileged perspective, for indigenous scholarship is not hereditary but is earned through research and a reciprocal exchange of views with indigenous communities.

By viewing research differently, the Afrocentric paradigm provides methods African people can use for making sense of their everyday experience. It takes the indigenous African's point-of-view. This means that the method differs markedly in its reflexive sensitivity to its data and the manner it analytically explores the data. The aim is to be sufficiently detailed and sensitive to actual social contexts and to investigate the methodological bases or orderly character of ordinary social activities. This means that the researcher should understand that what s/he does and how s/he does it is specific to the culture (a situated response), the problem, and dynamics of the particular context. To achieve the understanding of this *cultural framework* requires indigenous African people's involvement and control of research (Cunningham & Durie, 1998).

How can researchers implement the Afrocentric paradigm? The paradigm suggests that if research is to be Afrocentric, the African indigenous people must be in control of and participate in the entire research process, from beginning to end. It is from this viewpoint and experience that the type of African paradigm will be discussed. The discussion will focus on the underlying assumption regarding the nature of research, research methods, and the role of the "researched" in African indigenous communities.

The Afrocentric paradigm can be considered in terms of:

- Research *not* involving indigenous communities.
- Indigenous *community* involvement in the research process.
- Indigenous community *control* in the research process.

### **Research Not Involving Indigenous African Communities**

The first type of research identified in the paradigm is what is considered to hold little interest for indigenous communities, or which will have little impact on them. Thus it cannot be considered as Afrocentric because it is research where indigenous people's participation or data is neither sought nor considered relevant; research whose results are

thought to have no impact on indigenous communities. This research is being done without consulting or taking into account the interests of the people who live there.

As a result, some national development objectives and policies, as conceived by national-level officials and processes, have not always been consistent with the views, wishes, and interests of indigenous communities affected by them. Some policies have had a serious negative impact on indigenous communities' lives, including culture loss and alienation of learners from their communities. While not opposed to educational policies that bring improvement nationally and locally, indigenous African communities have consistently insisted that they be empowered to affect decisions that have an impact on their communities and their children. Recognition of, and respect for, the indigenous way of life is fundamental to good research practice. Experience has shown that conflicts arise when projects take place without an understanding of, or respect for, indigenous communities' strong beliefs and ways of life.

The exclusion of indigenous communities from research processes has led researchers to take cultural information out of context and have, as a result, created published documents that were factually incorrect. Thus, indigenous communities have felt excluded from policies. Research is often viewed as a "colonial intrusion," a use of power by the powerful. Questions of who sets research priorities and agendas, what gets done, and who benefits from it are often on the minds of the researched. Indigenous communities in other countries also commonly ask these questions. For example Flaherty (1995) echoes the very same concern when she states that:

At this very moment, there is research being undertaken on designing the new administration regimes for the Nunavut Territorial Government, its policies, programs, and services dealing with education, health, justice, and economic development. Many southerners that have learned about Inuit through books and from their fieldwork in the North have done or are doing research in these areas. This raises questions for me about what research is being done, why certain types of research get funded and who is doing it. This is a concern to me, not necessarily because many southerners or non-Inuit are doing this work but because Inuit are not truly participating as equals. (pp. 178-179)

Flaherty demonstrates a feeling of resentment over unequal distribution of benefits, risks, and participation. The resentment may be based on the assumption that local participation in research leads to professional recognition, advancement, and possible financial benefit for the researcher, with little tangible benefit for the indigenous participants in the research. The resentment reflects indigenous communities' concerns about the nature and merits of the research methods and the research itself. Thus, this research type reflects the extent to which many indigenous communities have come to feel uncomfortable with the mode and consequences of research development led by Western-oriented paradigms.

### **Research Involving Indigenous African Communities**

This is research where indigenous communities are involved as participants, subjects, or possibly as junior members of a research team. The indigenous communities

may be trained in contemporary research methods and mainstream analysis. This type of research might create more effective, more sustainable, more rational, and more genuine educational improvement processes. In particular, and among others, it offers enhanced accountability by identifying specific duties and duty-bearers of the indigenous people involved in the research process. Research is approached as a negotiated partnership, allowing the indigenous communities to define for themselves the degree to which they wish to make themselves available as subjects. Once an agreement has been reached as to how they will be involved, research moves from being alien to that of a partnership obligation with the researcher. The indigenous communities have control of the research process which makes it easier for everyone involved to monitor progress. Their active involvement may cultivate informed expectations of what constitutes research itself, its output, and productivity as well as informing the community from the onset regarding what the purpose of the research is and the expected outcomes (Cunningham & Durie, 1998). This moves us one step closer towards the Afrocentric method. The Afrocentric paradigm emphasises the active involvement of the “researched,” however participation alone is not enough to qualify the research activity as Afrocentric.

The “participatory” approach allows professionals to learn with, by, and from indigenous communities and to create a working relationship in which people's priorities and values become more fully expressed in research. This approach allows researchers to establish rapport, convene, catalyse, facilitate, adapt, “hand over the stick,” watch, listen, learn, and respect. Meanwhile, indigenous peoples' sense of empowerment grows as they map, model, diagram, interview, quantify, rank and score, inform and explain, show, discuss and analyse, plan, present, and share their knowledge and experience with others.

The participatory approach has found expression in a research project called REFLECT conducted in rural Lesotho, where adult literacy is piloted to villagers in order to help themselves. For example, twelve village learning circles have been established as spaces where REFLECT can be used to promote learning and development according to local needs. The REFLECT process usually moves through a cycle whereby participants start by identifying a problem and then moving into discussion and analysis of that problem. Literacy and numeracy are built into the process at any stage where skills are needed. In this case indigenous knowledge is being intergrated into adult literacy with the assistance of the community (Gillian, 2002).

However, for most South African research initiatives, the nature of the participation of indigenous communities has not been satisfactory. Their participation appears in some cases to be limited to being consulted on research priorities, design, and assisting in the execution and evaluation of research results. They have been treated as “informants” rather than colleagues and equals. For instance, researchers come from their universities, do their field research over a number of months, get to know people in the community, get local help, and then go back to write and publish their findings. They are acknowledged as the “experts” (particularly if they have included indigenous people in the data collection and can cite them in their research). The researchers are the ones policy-makers listen to when making decisions about design, delivery, or funding programs for indigenous communities. They are also the ones with the funding sources to do such research. There is an inherent bias in government and especially in funding sources to place academic and formal education credentials ahead of practices and

experience of indigenous people, when deciding upon expertise and identifying research priorities and research projects to fund.

For this reason indigenous communities are too often placed in a position of weakness as the laws, policies, and guidelines that pertain to research in their communities are not created by them rather established by government and professional institutions and associations. It is these bodies and institutions that also have access to the scarce funding available for research. Indigenous communities do not have the power to establish the rules of the game which anyone who chooses to do research in their communities will have to play by. In this context, the researched are not the researchers and have a very different level of control in the process than that of professional researchers. This counters the basic principle of Afrocentric paradigm research where indigenous people are supposed to have higher levels of empowerment, ownership, and free, meaningful and active participation, by being put in charge of the research process and improvement of their communities.

If the research process is to be truly collaborative, conflict is inherent and to be expected in the process, where the researcher and the researched are equal partners and come from different backgrounds. Accordingly, as conflict will arise, there is a need for dispute resolution mechanisms to resolve these conflicts in a fair and equitable way. This concern calls for researchers to have a local committee to guide researchers in local methods of conflict resolution. Therefore, active involvement and/or training of indigenous people is imperative as their involvement might provide opportunities to correct misinformation or to challenge ethnocentric or racist interpretations. In this way the recognition of potential conflict suggests that the participation of indigenous communities within the research initiatives will be equal. This gives them the role of being decision-makers and not a role limited to that of mere advisers.

### **African Centred Research**

This research is unique to the social structure and cultural values of African indigenous communities. It promotes the notion that relevant research output can be said to have been achieved when it could satisfy not only the material needs of the people, but also their intellectual, spiritual, and cultural needs.

Research where indigenous African people are significant participants, and are typically senior members of research teams often is made up of *all indigenous* African people and primarily meets expectations and quality standards set by indigenous communities. This type of research undertakes an African analysis and produces indigenous African knowledge that recognises the African voice; that tells another story. It re-affirms the centrality of cultural experience as the place to begin to create a dynamic multicultural approach to research. This is the *nucleus* of the Afrocentric paradigm. This type of knowledge is yet to be realised in South Africa. The aims are:

- to ensure development of an African-centred perspective
- to ensure that ethics are culturally defined; and have an indigenous African code
- to create guidelines and ensure genuine incorporation of indigenous African views in such documents
- to ensure research methods and styles that are culturally acceptable

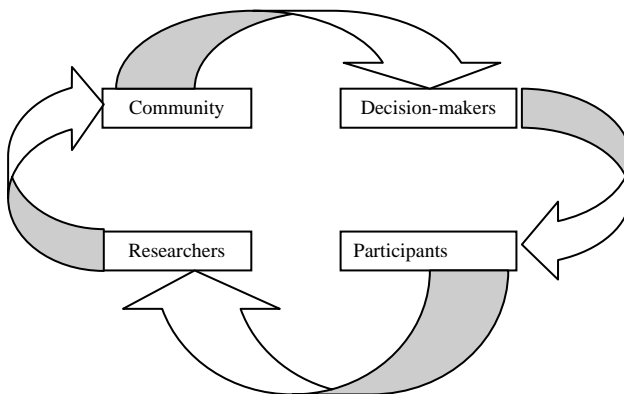
To make research culturally meaningful, the qualitative non-material aspect of research is emphasised. This could be achieved by setting educational research goals in terms of improving the quality of life and life opportunities by injecting cultural values into them and by promoting development in a more humane manner. In this conceptualisation, culture is not merely an important part of educational development, but it becomes an integral element of both research goals and means. Thus, culture is a guiding light, providing directions for research. On the other hand, culture also guides the means and process of educational development.

This type of research means that African indigenous culture must be understood and kept at the forefront of any research and recommendations affecting indigenous communities and their culture. The discussion that follows will demonstrate how *the collective identity* and *the holistic orientation*, which are the foundation of indigenous African culture, can be used to underpin research activities, approaches, and understanding in order to promote African-centred research.

### The Collective as a Centred Paradigm

Africans are known for their the strong orientation to collective values, particularly a collective sense of responsibility. Research has largely ignored, misunderstood, or disregarded the value of African indigenous communities' "collective ethic." The collective ethic recognises that survival derives from group harmony and all actions are within a collective context, which seeks to maintain the harmony and balance of an interrelated and essentially egalitarian system. It always stresses humanness (*ubuntu*) which is characterised by generosity, love, maturity, hospitality, politeness, understanding, and humility (Mkabela & Luthuli, 1997). Methodologically speaking, such research is translated into collaborative and co-operative research on behalf of the community and individuals within the community. The community being part of the research every step of the way and collectively validating the research helps guide the research toward enhancing community and cultural activity. This *spiral* (circular) approach to research will ultimately develop into a renewed collective value system for research that strengthens the centrality of African indigenous ideals and values as legitimate frames of reference for collecting and interpreting data (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The spiral method of data collection.



*Ubuntu*, the ground principle of the collective orientation, should guide the spiral method. In the context of *ubuntu*, mutuality between the participants, a feeling of tolerance, hospitality and respect for others, their language, opinions, and conversational style is highly regarded. There is no *I thou* relationship. Instead a human mode of consciousness is fundamental. This approach then suggests the need to move from an alienated mode of consciousness, which perceives the knower as separate from the known to a collective mode of consciousness. Such a mode of consciousness addresses a fundamental reordering of our understanding of the relationship between self and other and indeed between self and the world, in a manner where such an ordering not only includes connectedness, but necessitates letting go of the focus on self (Heshusius, 1994). Thus the African-centred research requires a re-definition of the nature of the relationship between the traditional researcher and the researched. It also means re-discovering indigenous African methodological preferences and practices in research. This has great implication for research and practice in its task of searching, collecting, and preserving knowledge.

What needs to be stressed at this point is the question of reviving and regenerating African indigenous collective ethic, not for its own sake, but to serve as the basis on which research methods could be adapted and used. The ethic translated into research would include:

- an appreciation of the importance of all individuals in the research group
- an understanding that research is part of a very complex (community) whole
- the respect of heritage authority
- the inclusion of elders and cultural committees in the research process
- an understanding of the interconnectedness of all things (including the spiritual) and a required long term perspective in dealing with research issues
- researchers must act in an appropriate and respectful way to maintain the harmony and balance of the group (community)

A deep and detailed understanding and respect for all parts of human existence means that any research initiative must involve an appreciation of the holistic orientation of the indigenous African people. Therefore, the way indigenous communities view the world and their role greatly influences how they approach problems, resolve issues, gather information, and in this circumstance manage research.

The collective as well as the holistic orientation suggest that research should disclose and apply codes, paradigms, symbols, and circles of discussion that strengthen the centrality of indigenous African ideals and values as a legitimate frame of reference for collecting and interpreting data. Such a discourse assumes the social, political, intellectual, and cultural legitimacy of indigenous African people. This means that African indigenous culture, knowledge, language, and values are accepted in their own right. In this regard research maintains community and the collective as central.

By accepting the value of a deeper understanding of the collective orientation researchers could enhance the influence of African indigenous culture in their research by adopting and accommodating the collective moral responsibility. Strategies of managing research, for example, could be enhanced if elders and other holders of knowledge were included in the decision making process, as they are well-versed with indigenous African

knowledge and traditional protocol. They need to be kept at the forefront of any research and recommendations affecting indigenous communities and their culture.

Such a multidimensional (holistic) approach should be used in research where there is respect for the group itself in the context of making decisions for sustainable outcomes both for, and by, the community. For example, when natural and social life is integrated into a single whole, relationships between individuals become intimate. Rather than a connection through a single work relationship, individuals interconnect through multiple bonds. This promotes understanding, confidence, and closeness that might discourage selfish or dishonest action in the group, since abused relationships cannot be left behind. Each person's true level of effort and of performance stands out, and the close relationship brings about a high level of subtlety in understanding each other's needs and plans. This mixture of support and restraint promotes mutual trust, since compatible goals and complete openness remove the fears of, or desires for, deception and appropriation of indigenous African knowledge, practices, and culture by well-intentioned, well-meaning researchers. I am not only talking about academics who do fundamental research associated with their particular area of interest, but also those who undertake research as part of government or business contracts. Thus, intimacy, trust, and understanding grow where individuals are linked to one another through multiple bonds in a holistic relationship. This relationship promotes conformity, generosity, openness and consideration of group members' interest over selfish interest. It promotes feelings of ownership that motivates members to invest time and energy, to help shape the nature and quality of the research process as opposed to being merely involved in research. In this context individuals are free but they are also discouraged from selfish or dishonest action which promotes a peaceful co-existence. Thus the holistic network serves as an effective means of social control.

The collective paradigm determines the pace and methods of research, the construction and validation/legitimation of knowledge and finally the processing and constructing of meaning. It should also be taken into account that such a practice is not an isolated phenomenon, but is deeply embedded in wider cultural aspirations, preferences, and practices of indigenous Africans. For instance, using the collective methodology in Eurocentric contexts can have negative results. Contradiction might arise as to how to transform the data collected through subjective circular community-based processes into individualistic linearity required by Western contexts. This may lead to subjective data being committed to a linear form that is, decontextualised from their wider and more holistic life narratives. The Afrocentric method therefore, emphasises a shift from dominant research methodologies to ways that are responsive to an African world-view which is collective; one in which the community itself will influence and shape the method.

In conclusion, the Afrocentric method views the problem of cultural location as taking precedence over the topic or the data under consideration. This means that research should:

- involve a very strong tendency towards searching for African examples, values, and concepts, towards privileging the Afrocentric approach, voices, and systems.
- observe and respect African traditional protocol with regard to the discretion and reticence of elders to access to knowledge.

The proposal for an Afrocentric method, however, is not to denigrate Western methodology, but to re-examine and complement any thinking that attributes undue Western superiority at the expense of neglecting African thought. The Afrocentric method can be used as a complement to qualitative research methods. It shares the same characteristics of qualitative research methods in that both Afrocentric and qualitative methods assume that people employ interpretive schemes which must be understood and that the character of the local context must be articulated. The issue is not so much on complementary methods, but one of an alternative paradigm and the ontology of understanding the world and what it is to be human. What I intended to do here was, therefore, to look for a sound research methodology which can serve as a foundation stone that can truly come to grips with indigenous knowledge. This is *not* to suggest that this will resolve in any ultimate sense the various research-related problems that arise in indigenous communities. Rather it is to suggest a meaningful direction for better understanding and thereby contribute as much as possible toward a purposeful accommodation of those issues or problems that researchers currently face in researching indigenous African culture.

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