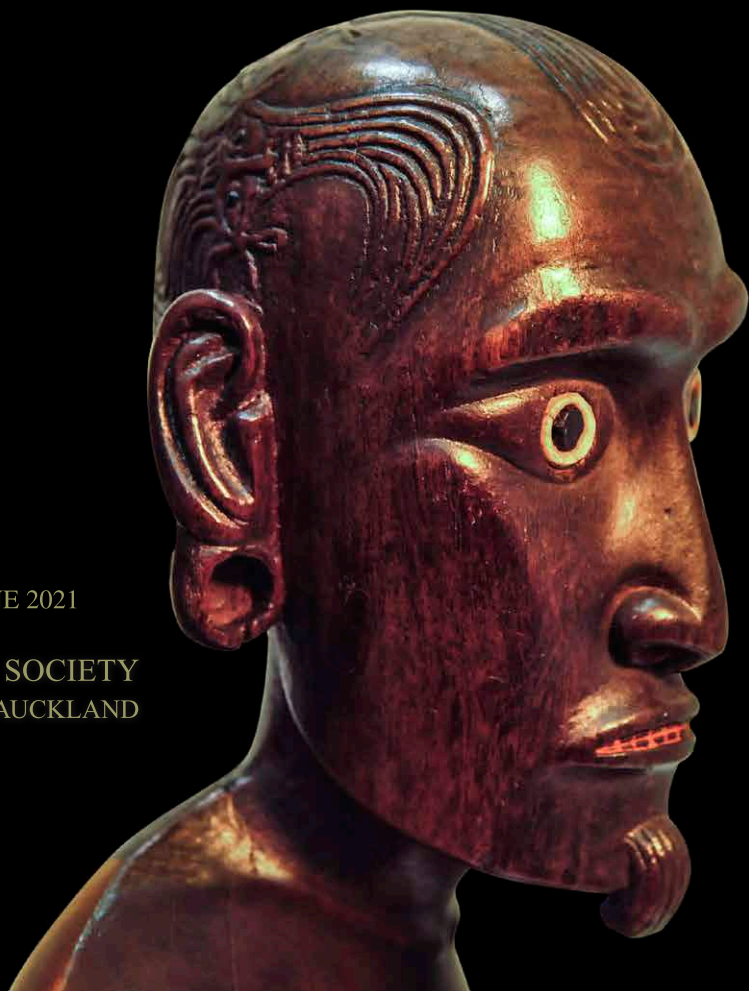


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# DISTINGUISHING “EXPERTISE” IN TE REO MĀORI: TOHUNGA, PŪ AND REHE

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents a model that defines and differentiates three varieties of indigenous Māori expertise—tohunga, pū and rehe. The three terms are commonly defined in the modern Aotearoa New Zealand literature—both academic and non-academic—to all mean the same thing, ‘expert’. However, given the importance of knowledge transfer in precolonial society, as well as the established political order in which tohunga are known to historically have played an important role, it seems unlikely that Māori tīpuna ‘ancestors’ would have used the terms interchangeably. Through an analysis of a sample of newspapers, academic works, dictionaries and traditional Māori resources (whakataukī ‘proverbs’, kīwaha ‘idioms’, pūrākau ‘histories and mythologies’), primarily older works but also a small collection of newer examples from academia and governmental resources for comparison, the three terms are defined. I argue that each had unique purposes in traditional Māori society, they were ranked and there were specific requirements for achieving each rank. My aim is to help clarify, communicate and legitimise categories of Māori expertise and their use in a society that is increasingly recognising and asserting indigenous rights and treaty obligations.

*Keywords:* language change, te reo Māori, cultural expertise, tohunga, pū, rehe, indigenous newspapers, whakataukī ‘proverbs’

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There is no doubt that, right now, Māori expertise is in demand. There are increasing calls for *te reo Māori* ‘Māori language’ teachers, *tikanga Māori* ‘Māori customs’ experts and more Māori representation in New Zealand schools, workplaces, healthcare facilities, government and media. Consequently, Māori concepts of expertise are increasingly discussed, particularly within the context of healthcare (Waitangi Tribunal 2011). This has resulted in increased usage of the Māori terms *rehe*, *pū* and *tohunga*, which are all varieties of ‘expert’ in the contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand lexicon. Whilst this is an undeniably positive trend, Māori ought to consider whether the predominantly Pākehā ‘European’ or otherwise colonised systems in New Zealand society are adequately equipped to understand and use these terms, and by extension Māori expertise, to achieve optimum outcomes for Māori and Pākehā alike. What *tohunga*, *pū* and *rehe* meant to

Māori ancestors will be different to what they mean to Māori today, but an essential nature of tikanga Māori is that it is rooted in *whakapapa* ‘genealogy’ (Smith 2012: 285–88; Waitangi Tribunal 2011: 22). This means that the fundamental principles and characteristics applied to those terms before the arrival of Pākehā (i.e., prior to colonisation) will be the same that Māori apply today. The purpose of this article, then, is to analyse the literature on these terms and their use in both precolonial contexts and today, determine the fundamental principles and characteristics applied to them and ultimately propose a theoretical model with which we can structure our understanding of Māori expertise in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

It is not difficult to find discussions of Māori expertise in the contemporary literature across a variety of disciplines, where the terms *rehe*, *pū* and *tohunga* are often used. However, the ways these are used is often vague and sometimes result in inconsistent or overlapping definitions. The concern here is that, to the inexperienced reader, the terms will appear to all point to the same meaning, that is, an abstract concept of a ‘Māori expert’. Another concern is that by generalising the te reo Māori terms, Māori will lose nuances in Māori bodies of knowledge, and with this, depths in specialist fields; the variety of Māori experts—tohunga, pū and rehe—are potentially treated as ‘jacks of all trades’ rather than as different kinds of specialists. A look through some of the older texts demonstrates that in precolonial Māori society the terms were used to describe specific varieties of experts and expertise.

A quality of *rehe* that appears frequently in older texts is it is used as an element of compound *kupu* ‘words’ or *kīwaha* ‘idioms/expressions’ to add a quality of “expertise”. Some examples of this include *Patu-pai-arehe* ‘ancient supernatural beings’ (Lind 1947: 36–38) and *kātua-rehe* ‘expert, deft person, rascal’ (Ngata 1993: 375; Orbell 1973) in *pūrākau* ‘histories, mythologies, stories’, *rehe-taiaha* ‘taiaha expert’ in *mōteatea* ‘lament, sung poetry’ (Ngata 1956: 206) and *matারেhe* ‘handiwork’ in *kīwaha* (“Word List”, 1928: 171).

Within these examples, there is a theme of recognising the expertise involved in art, weaving or other handiwork. Given its use in conjunctions, the word *rehe* also seems to appear more frequently in *whakataukī* ‘proverbs’, *kīwaha* or *pūrākau*, which might suggest it has a more candid, colloquial or even humorous use than *pū* or *tohunga*. The *whakataukī* “Nā te rehe” provides a starting point for looking at these patterns. Mead and Grove (2001: 317) translate the *whakataukī* to mean ‘by an expert’ and explain that this is intended to be a compliment on some “fine handiwork, most appropriately weaving or tattooing” (Mead and Grove 2001: 317). “Nā te rehe” also appears in the Williams dictionary (2001: 333) under the term ‘rehe’ and is prefaced by “Au mahi, e te rehe!—He maikuku tona tukunga iho he rehe” (The work of the rehe!—a neat-fingered (*maikuku*) result, a

neat-handed person), which further emphasises the focus *rehe* places on expert handiwork. The concentration on the hands is continued in other available references: a *kīwaha* from Whanganui included in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (1928: 171) Word Lists series, “He maui matarehe”, refers to someone who is left-handed, *he maui* in this case referring to ‘left’ and the aforementioned *matarehe* to handiwork.

The term *kātua-rehe* demonstrates the colloquial nature of *rehe* as a term for expertise. It makes a notable appearance in a *pūrākau* recorded at the turn of the century from Ngāti Awa. Margaret Orbell (1973) discusses two versions of this *pūrākau*, which centres on the life of Te Tahī o te Rangi, a famous *tohunga* of Ngāti Awa, where one version is written by Hāmiora Pio and the other by Tīmi Wāta Rimini. Hāmiora writes from the perspective of a *tohunga*, whereas Tīmi, who is younger and not a *tohunga*, writes from more of a “layperson’s” perspective. As Orbell (p. 129) explains, these differing perspectives resulted in vastly different styles and appreciations of the story. Hāmiora tells the story very precisely and directly, and any seemingly arbitrary details have a specific utility, e.g., indicating the name of an important location. Tīmi instead presents the story with more fantasy, and including illustrations, which Orbell (p. 130) explains is a demonstration of how a traditional *pūrākau* might be used to serve an ‘untraditional’ purpose; whereas Hāmiora’s telling is educational, Tīmi’s is bolstering, for humour and *whakawhanaungatanga* ‘community/relationship building’. This stylisation is nowhere more apparent than when Tīmi describes Te Tahī as “*kātua-rehe*”, translated by Orbell (p. 136) to mean ‘cunning rascal’, ‘expert’ and ‘hero’. To describe a *tohunga* in this way is indicative of the more colloquial kind of expertise *rehe* was used to represent. In other contexts, it refers to a talented hand; in this context it refers to an expert with fame or a charismatic quality.

*Pūkenga*, on the other hand, appears to have been more of a standardised term for an ‘expert/authority’ or for a ‘skill’ or ‘expertise’ in whatever context provided, but also has a unique history as a title for someone who is a repository of knowledge or a teacher of *tohunga* in *whare wānanga* ‘houses of learning’. An early example of its standard use can be found in an 1885 edition of the newspaper *Te Korimako*, in which a lament to General Korano stated that the general had never considered himself a *pūkenga* with notable *taonga* ‘wealth’, *mana* ‘prestige/reputation’ or *kororia* ‘glory’, but merely that he cared that the work he did was quality (“*otira ko te mahi i te pai ko te mahi i te tika ko ia te take i whakaritea e ia mona*”) (*Te Korimako* 1885: 2). The author uses *pūkenga* again later in the piece, but this time to describe the skills that General Korano had and had passed on, and that whilst his passing was a true loss, those *pūkenga* will live (p. 2). Another writer from 1888, also in *Te Korimako*, uses *pūkenga* when describing the

technology of pigeon delivery services, saying that communication is “te pūkenga me te ahua o te hinengaro” (a skill and aspect of the mind) (*Te Korimako* 1888: 10).

*Pūkenga* was also used as a title for someone who acted as a teacher in the whare wānanga and who instructed and trained the tohunga, the full title being “tohunga pūkenga” (Smith 2008: 268). A famed *karakia* ‘prayer/incantation’ that Rātā used when felling a tree for his canoe addresses the whare wānanga—its pūkenga and *tauirā* ‘students’ as a group:

Kotia te pu ka waiho i uta, Ko te kauru ka to ki tai; E ai ra ko te umu tuhi,  
Kihai tae ki nga pūkenga, Ki nga wananga, ki nga tauira. (Pomare 1876: 3)

Cut away the base of the tree, and here leave it, cut away the crown of the tree, and here leave it, ‘Tis said that the ceremonial oven did not concern the *learned ones*, nor those versed in ancient knowledge. (Graham’s translation, 1924: 132; emphasis mine)

This confirms the “vocational” quality *pūkenga* can possess, as well as being a general term for skill. This traditional quality can be considered the origin of how *pūkenga* came to be a standard term for a university lecturer (Ryan 2008: 249) following the imposition of foreign schooling systems.

However, as a title, *pūkenga* was not limited to tohunga pūkenga but was also used as a term for someone who acted as a general repository of knowledge for the people (Williams 2001: 307). A letter to the editor from the *Manawatu Times* in 1923, written in English but discussing te reo Māori, finishes with the line “Ask questions, and you become my *pūkenga*”, a demonstration of the ability of community members to educate each other with personal wisdoms (*Manawatu Times* 1923: 4).

Of further interest is the existence of the *tipuna* ‘ancestor’ who was named Pūkenga of Ngāti Pūkenga. I am aware of brief histories explaining how his name was indication that he was considered to be a repository of knowledge for the *hapori* ‘community’, but I ran into difficulty finding further information on the nature of his life and name. This is definitely a point of interest for future research.

*Tohunga* was the most formalised of these terms. From the literature on precolonial tohunga, we can identify five qualities that distinguish their title from *pūkenga* and *rehe*: the whare wānanga, reading *tohu* ‘signs, indications’, relationship with *tapu* ‘methodology of restrictions for the purpose of group maintenance’, mana and responsibilities for public wellbeing.

The study that tohunga undertook at whare wānanga is arguably their most distinctive point of difference as a kind of expert. The manuscripts of Te Matorohanga, a Ngāti Whakawhena tohunga, recorded by H.T. Whatahoro in 1865, provide some authentic knowledge as to what was taught at the

whare wānanga and how they operated, although according to Simmons and Biggs (1970) and Simmons (1994), some of the published material using these manuscripts has either added new information not provided by Te Matorohanga (Simmons 1994: 117) or used other manuscripts from Whatahoro and linked them to false sources (Simmons and Biggs 1970: 41). However, when applying a critical lens to these sources we can draw out knowledge of what these places were like and the topics that tohunga studied in the whare wānanga. The whare wānanga were physical buildings, the designs of which had whakapapa to the original *whare-kura* ‘way of learning’ of the *ātua* ‘gods’ (Matorohanga, cited in Te Whatahoro *et al.* 1915: 39–40). The subjects considered here fell into two categories, *wānanga-a-Rangi* ‘heavenly/philosophical knowledge’ and *wānanga-a-Papa* ‘knowledge of the earth’ (pp. 53–54). The *wānanga-a-Rangi* taught karakia, pūrākau, whakapapa and tapu (Simmons 1994: 148–62), *rāhui* ‘environmental restriction’ (Mead 2016) and death and embalming (Wikatene 2006). The *wānanga-a-Papa* taught astronomy, horticulture, geology (including earthquakes and volcanoes), marine biology and fishing, tattooing and meteorology (Simmons 1994: 148–62). Within the *wānanga-a-Papa*, it is believed that tohunga were taught the skills of reading tohu (Smith 2008).

Smith (2008: 266–70) explains the concept of tohu, in precolonial Aotearoa New Zealand, as signs that were imperative for economic success, health and political survival. Tohu could provide information on environmental conditions, *tohu moana* ‘ocean conditions’ indicating the quality of fishing and *tohu rangi* ‘sky conditions’ indicating temporal, meteorological and astronomical information. Tohu could also provide historical and political information, *tohu whenua* ‘landmarks’ could convey whakapapa or cultural information about the area and *tohu rangatira* ‘leadership qualities’ could indicate a person or group with political prowess. Lastly, tohu could provide information on health-related issues, *tohu aituā* indicating potential for widespread death, ill health or misfortune and *tohu mate* indicating the same but for individuals.

It is noteworthy that these tohu all deal with tapu. Tapu is a highly complex concept and, according to Shirres (1982: 34–36), exists in two forms, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic tapu are tapu in and of themselves and can be found in the origins of Māori whakapapa in the *ātua*. These intrinsic tapu materialise as the winds (Tāwhiri), the human race (Tū), *kūmara* ‘sweet potato’ (Rongo), sea/fish (Tangaroa), forest/birds (Tāne) and fernroot (Haumia). Extensions of tapu are essentially physical access points to the intrinsic tapu, and as links, it is through them that a clash of intrinsic tapu can occur. Extensions of tapu are inescapable in everyday life, and include the hands (Tū), menstruation (Papatūānuku), harvesting (Rongo), the ocean (Tangaroa), corpses (Hinenuitēpō) and the canoe (Tāne), among many others.

Throughout the literature, there are examples of tohunga routinely engaging with extensions of tapu. This was likely because since they were highly educated and skilled in tohu, they were able to engage with tapu at a lesser risk of harming their own or others’ intrinsic tapu. Engaging in this work would often leave their hands and bodies in an intensified state of tapu (Waitangi Tribunal 2011: 211; Walker 2004: 66), which meant they risked contaminating things they touched, in essence placing a tapu on them (Waitangi Tribunal 2011: 211; White 1888: 58–61). Rerekura (2011) explains this phenomenon in the context of *whaikōrero* ‘oration’, where the *kaikōrero* ‘orator’ cannot also be *kaitunu* ‘cook’ without the risk of contaminating the food after their *whaikōrero*. When Walker (2004: 66–67) discusses tohunga, whilst he defines the term as a ‘generic term for expert’, he does emphasise the risks tohunga took when engaging with tapu and the specialised tikanga that existed to navigate such conditions.

The literature also indicates that tohunga were some of the most tapu individuals in any given *hapū* ‘sub-tribe’ (Mahuika 1972: 115; Prytz-Johansen 1958; Walker 2004: 67; White 1888: 58–61). White (1888: 58–61) discusses the story of Kiki, a tohunga from Waikato, and his ultimate demise at the hands of Tamure, another Waikato tohunga. Kiki was considered to have been so powerful that when the sun shone, he was not allowed to go out of his house because he was so tapu that if his shadow touched a tree, the tree would wither and die, such was the clash of tapu: this resulted in the proverb “The descendants of Kiki the tree-blighter” (White 1888: 58). Tamure, who was a competing tohunga in the area, wished to face this power of Kiki’s and so decided to visit him, bringing along two companions and his daughter. The journey involved many *karakia*, an important tool with which tohunga and others can manipulate tapu by applying it or removing it and making the environment *noa* ‘safe from clashes of tapu’. Upon arrival, Kiki invited the group to a meal, his plan being to *whakatapu* ‘make tapu’ the food with his own tapu by cooking it in his personal oven and as such incite a clash of tapu within Tamure through the food. However, Tamure had a plan to counter this, applying a *karakia whakatapu* to the door of Kiki’s house and asking his own daughter to partake in the food instead of them, placing the first piece under her feet. This, combined with *karakia* which Tamure chanted over his daughter, was an act which would *whakanoa* ‘make noa’ the food imbued with Kiki’s own tapu. Having his own tapu made noa, Kiki became very sick and died. What this story demonstrates is the important role tapu played in the work of tohunga. Most of the actions taken by Kiki and Tamure in this story are ones in which they are manipulating tapu, and the remainder of the actions reflect on the political prowess they wielded in their communities, indicative of how someone’s tapu influences their mana.

The link between the tapu of the tohunga and their high mana is confirmed in both Shirres (1982: 32–34) and Prytz-Johansen (1958). The successful completion of a tapu ritual was shown routinely in Māori histories to result in a confirmation of new mana (Shirres 1982: 33). Whilst Shirres (1982: 32) describes this phenomenon philosophically, this was also likely because having the skills to navigate tapu would have made one an asset to one's community. Such skills could be used to keep the community safe and provide them opportunities to embolden their own mana, for example through a successful campaign for food, battle in war, *pōwhiri* 'welcoming ritual' or birth. Prytz-Johansen (1958) explains that because tapu provided such opportunities for mana growth, Māori would not shun it but would actively seek it out because whilst the risk was high, so were the rewards. However, the high risks also meant that tohunga often took more of an advisory role within tapu rituals. An example from Wikatene (2006) is that a tohunga might not prepare a *tūpāpaku* 'corpse' themselves but rather instruct the relatives to do so; another example in Prytz-Johansen (1958) is the leadership and ritualistic roles of the tohunga in the cultivation of kūmara but their abstention from the more laborious tasks involved.

The importance of tapu in the roles of tohunga, as well as their mana/political prowess, is also reflected in the work of Mahuika (1972: 114–18) in his thesis on female leaders in Ngāti Porou. He describes the primary function of tohunga as being "interpreters of the gods" given their unique access to sacred knowledge learnt in the whare wānanga. This knowledge allowed tohunga to use not only karakia imbued with tapu but also the skill of prophecy (pp. 115–16). According to Mahuika (p. 115), if the tohunga failed in their duties, they would damage or lose entirely their *mana atua* 'godly tapu', people would cease to follow and respect them (they would lose mana), and if the task were of great importance, for example predicting the outcome of a war effort, they would lose their life. The converse was also true. The skill of "prophecy", as Mahuika describes it, particularly as a skill coming from whare wānanga, was probably more akin to the skills of observing and interpreting tohu, which as aforementioned were taught in whare wānanga.

The final characteristic of tohunga to consider here is their role within public health. Of all the characteristics mentioned, this one has the most prominence in policy, and health and well-being practices related to Māori. It is not unfounded to consider how Māori might view many tohunga today whilst remaining true to the tikanga surrounding their traditional role. One of the earliest experts to discuss this is Peter Buck (Te Rangi Hīroa), who explained that illnesses were frequently regarded as being caused by infringements of tapu (Buck 1945). If a tapu was broken, someone could



be struck with a variety of illnesses, from loss of appetite and fever to *kutu-kutu-ahi* ‘delirium’ (Buck 1945: 405). Tohunga were then asked to address the infringement and subsequent ailment to restore the person: Buck (1945: 405) equates this diagnosing a patient and treating them. If this was a mental illness, Buck (1945: 405) explains that tohunga took on the role of psychiatrist and prescribed treatments such as therapy and dream analysis.

This concept was emphasised in the Waitangi Tribunal (2011) report *Ko Aotearoa Tēnei*. The report outlines the impact of the Tohunga Suppression Act, which affected the ability of tohunga to access *rongoā* ‘traditional medicines’ and which worked to devalue Māori medicine. Like Buck (1945), the Tribunal (2011: 211–12) explains that tohunga worked with *rongoā* in the context of tapu. The Tribunal (2011: 214–30) also outlined issues tohunga faced with the arrival of foreign disease, their delegitimisation by Pākehā and Māori alike and the subsequent lack of a support system for Māori health, which continues today.

Where this leaves us is a modern Aotearoa New Zealand full of Māori experts—tohunga, pū and rehe. However, because of colonisation and the new systems and circumstances thus imposed on Māori, the means outlined here for distinguishing among these different kinds of experts and terms have been lost. All three can be and often are defined the same. This effect is most noticeable in dictionaries. A good example is *The Raupō Dictionary of Modern Māori* (Ryan 2008), where in the Māori-to-English section, *tohunga*, *pūkenga* and *rehe* are all defined as relatively unique forms of “experts” (in short, priests, experts and lecturers), and in fact *tohunga* is defined in 36 unique varieties, whereas in the English-to-Māori section, *tohunga* is the only one of the three terms provided as a translation for “expert”. Consequently, it appears that *tohunga* now acts as the default term for “expert”, which is perverse given the immense prestige historically embedded in this role. Using *tohunga* as the default term has the potential to unnecessarily exaggerate the mana of some expertise in te ao Māori, place undue pressure and expectations on up-and-coming specialists and truly undervalue the mana of established tohunga. These factors all risk negative outcomes in the quality of work and the health of the expert, as well as that of the community and the cultural competency of New Zealanders generally. Using each term more carefully would likely lower these risks and assist Māori in best recognising and deploying their varied kinds of expertise. Furthermore, the more defined terms would assist non-Māori in engaging Māori specialists who have the appropriate skills for their needs.

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As explored herein, when we examine what is available of the old interpretations, we can identify distinctive qualities of each that would be useful in helping us understand and refine our understanding of the nature of Māori expertise today. *Rehe* was a colloquial term found most commonly in whakataukī and kīwaha and was used to describe someone who was a professional at a hand-crafting skill and/or who was famous, charismatic or renowned. *Pū* was the most common and generic word for expert and skill, used to elaborate on someone's role or reputation, and sometimes as a title when it came to teachers or knowledgeable community leaders. *Tohunga* was a term reserved for only the most distinguished of experts and applied to someone who had been trained or qualified in a discipline. As in the past, today we might best apply it to one who has achieved such a hold over that discipline that they consistently produce high-quality outcomes (tohu), can navigate the most difficult parts of the job (e.g., tapu), commands the utmost respect in their field (mana) and supports the wellbeing of their community (ideally in a health-centred capacity). I would argue further that *tohunga* should be reserved exclusively for tapu experts, as consistent with past usage. This is not the case presently as the distinctions have become increasingly blurred. However, whilst *tohunga* might again become a term reserved for tapu experts, *tikanga* Māori and *te reo* Māori are not static; instead they adapt to support Māori in ever-changing circumstances. As such, it may be appropriate to extend the scope of the duties of a *tohunga* to include non-tapu activities that hold a similar weight and which are rooted in the whakapapa of the *tohunga* role.

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