



Children of the Chopcca community

Photography: Felicidar (2019)



Report

Tradition and customs of the Chopcca nation of Peru

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The Chopcca are a nation that remains and preserves its traditions and customs over time. The Chopcca nation comprises several communities that are located in the Huancavelica region, in the high Andean zone of Peru. This nation is distributed between two provinces, Huancavelica and Acobamba, and covers sixteen populated centers, ten in Yauli district and six in Paucará district, in Acobamba province.

The name Chopcca makes reference to a character of the same name that

represents a “common ancestor”. Since there are no documentary records on its origin, some oral sources that refer to times prior to the arrival of the Incas at the region can be cited; accounts provided by the villager Arturo Crispín Quinchu and collected by the Ministry of Culture in 2007. According to the villager, the nation was named after a character called Chopcca, considered a cultural hero that represents the values of the community. Below, an excerpt of the accounts in the native language (Quechua) and its translation are offered:

Original accounts in Quechua

“Kunan kay chopcca suyupi, ñawpaq pachapi yachasqa huk runa anqara Chopcca sutiyuq, chay runas kasqa qari qarillaña, pachakuynipas kasqa kasma chopcca, paysi chay apu patruna lisukusqa llaqtan respitachinampaq qinaspansi mana kasukusqachu chay kamachikuyinta, chay patrunkunaqa chakataspanku plaza pampapi wañurachinku. Chay yuyarinankupaq chay llaqtapa sutinta churarunku Chopcca nispa”.

“Ninkun chay Chopccapampa llaqtapis yachasqa chay runa Chopcca sutiyuq. Chay runas kasqa qatun karay, kallpasapa, qari qari, paysi kanman kasqa Anqara taytamamayuqraq, chaysi pachakusqa chopccakuna hina, chay español runakuna suyunchikman chayaramuspansi chay taytapas wañurachisqaku, tayta Tupac Amaruta qinataraq. Chaymanta pacham sutinta yuyanankupaq Chopccawan suti-charunku chay llaqtata.”

The Chopcca nation was taken into account for the first time during the government of Velasco Alvarado because of the agrarian reform in 1969. Afterwards, in 1981, the Chopcca achieved their official recognition as “Peasant Community of Chopcca” through a resolution issued by the Ministry of Agriculture; and it was finally registered in the Public Registers of Huancavelica a year later. Since then, it has an extension of 10,935 hectares in the high Andean area. If it were not for their leaders, the

communities would continue to be excluded from the historical and cultural map, as happened to some populated centers that belong to the Chopcca area, such as Paucará, Pumaranra, Chontaka, and Paqcho.

Below, some remarkable aspects of these communities, that still preserve their ancestral ways of life, are provided in order to achieve a better understanding of their reality and let their traditions and celebrations amaze us.

Translation into English

“In the current Chopcca territory, but many years ago, an Anqara man named Chopcca lived. He was a very brave and battle-hardened man, who wore the typical Chopcca clothing. He asserted the rights of his people. Therefore, he opposed the orders of his masters, refusing to obey them. As a result, he was crucified and killed in the main square. In his honor, the men of those times called the place Chopcca. “

“It is said that many years ago, in a town that nowadays bears the name *Chopccapampa*, a man named Chopcca lived. He was tall, strong, and very brave; he was a descendant of the Anqaras. He dressed in typical Chopcca clothing. With the arrival of the Spaniards, he confronted them and ended up being killed as happened to Túpac Amaru. From that date on, the town carries the name Chopcca in his honor.”



Terrorism survivors

In times of terrorism in Peru, rural communities were the most affected. The Chopccas were aware of the threats against their lands and people, until in 1984 they decided to defend themselves against terrorist groups by creating their self-defense peasant rounds. Initially, the rounds were composed of men only, but then women were incorporated as a security measure for the inhabitants.

As a result of this initiative, the stay of terrorist groups in their region was avoided, gaining a considerable reputation and becoming a living example of courage and communal organization. Below, there is an excerpt of the testimony given by Jorge Layme Escobar, a Chopcca inhabitant who recounts part of the heroic defense undertaken at that time (Roel and Martínez, 2013):

“In the current Chopcca territory, but many years ago, an Angara man named Chopcca lived”



Children of the Chopccapampa community
Photography: Felicidar (2019)

Original accounts in Quechua

“Chay pachaqa karqa sasachakuymi ñuqanchikpaq, Ilapa terroristakunam yaykuramurqaku, chaypaqa chopcakunaqa kawsaranikuy quñulla. Wakin kamachikuqkunawan Ilaqtamasiykunam asuykuraku parlariq, mikuy ruraq, pachakuna puñunampaq huq. Chaykunam puñusqaku, chaymantas pacha achikyaykuyta tayta presidente de la comunidadta qapiruspa chaqnarunku, chayta yacharuspankus wakin Ilaqtamasinkunawan qayanakurunku rimanakuyman, chay terroristakuna kutichikunankupaq, chaypis terroristakunaqa qallarinku armanku tuqyachiyta hinaspamkus ayqirunku Antawasiman. Chaypis achka Ilaqtaruna kamachikuqkunapas wañusqaku (...).

(...) Chopccakunaqa warakankuwansi terroristakuwan piliasqaku, manas kasqachu armanku, chay Tinaqasapi qanchis terroristata wañurachisqaku, chullallanas qiparusqa. Chay huk puchuqtapas qapiruspankus Tinaqasapi wañurachiswaku hinaspachayllapi pamparunku”.

Translation into English

“It was a difficult time for all of us; terrorists raided the town. The Chopccas were very united. Some chiefs and community members gave them the welcome, held a conversation with them, prepared some food for them, and lent them some furs to rest. Nevertheless, when the Chopccas were already sleeping at around two in the morning, the raiders captured the community leader. After the other community members realized it, they called quietly and quickly an assembly in order to organize an attack against the terrorists. So they did it, but the terrorists began to shoot and escaped to Antawasa (Antaccasa). On that occasion, several people died, including chiefs (...).

(Around Selaqaqa) the Chopccas attacked with their huarakas (slings). They did not have any other weapons, but managed to kill them in a place called Tinaqasa. There were about eight terrorists; there was only one left in the end. Then, he built a bomb in a milk can, but the Chopccas caught him, killed him, and buried him in the same place of Tinaqasa.”

The Easter celebration

Prior to the Holy Week celebration, uttering a prayer every Friday is a custom. It is practiced for seven whole weeks prior to the celebration, consulting the calendar established by the Catholic Church. This way, the Via Crucis of Jesus, called Aku (rest), is commemorated. After these seven weeks, the Good Friday or “Big Friday” arrives. During the early hours of that day,

the yanapay (help) is carried out; an act in which children are whipped twice by the fathers of the families or godparents with the aim of lessening the pain of Christ.

In this communion between the Andean and the Catholic, the Chopccas are concerned with the welfare of their animals, carrying out a saumachi (fumigation of the



*Portrait of a peasant from
Huancavelica at 4200
meters above sea level .*

Photography: Michael Lohse (2016)



corrals) with dried eucalyptus and molle leaves in the afternoon, in order to prevent the diseases and plagues that threaten their farmyard animals. On this day, they also perform a recreation of the passion of Christ in procession, and in the late afternoon, young people throw flowers at the images present in procession and along the way. Moreover, they decorate the streets and corners with carpets of flower petals.

On Saturday, they distribute hot drinks, such as coffee and herbal tea among inhabitants. And when

the Day of Glory (Easter Sunday) arrives, the champatikray or kuchuscha (fight between two young men of the same age, who, with their hands on the back, hit each other trying to knock down the opponent) begins in the middle of a ring in the town square. These are activities that test the strength and abilities of men in the community to celebrate the ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven.

Festivals of the productive cycle

This region celebrates during each stage of the productive cycle,

“The carnival takes place at the beginning of the productive cycle of the Andean region”



Wedding ceremony in a remote place of the Andes at 4200 meters above sea level.
Photography: Michael Lohse (2017)

becoming an important manner to keep alive the communal and ethnic identity of the Chopccas. These celebrations constitute a clear evidence of the Chopccas' vision of the natural world and the forms of relating among themselves: with women, chiefs, and their natural, spiritual environment; in other words, their way of being and feeling, their true Chopcca identity. The most outstanding celebrations are the carnival (between January and February, in the rainy season), the branding (cattle branding at the end of July), and the vigawantuy (communal transport of trunks destined to construction in August).

These celebrations are considered the most traditional and authentic cultural manifestations of the Chopccas, involving a massive participation of the Chopcca towns. In addition, these celebrations are a great opportunity for single men and women to find a marriage partner, as well as a chance to gain prestige and recognition in their communities.

The carnival

The carnival takes place at the beginning of the productive cycle of the Andean region; that is, the start of the agricultural period and the rainy

Mother and daughter in the Andes, Peru

Photography: Michael Lohse (2016)





season. It is characterized by its rituals and offerings to nature (the land, mountains, and rivers) in order to achieve rich harvests and the protection of the crops and animals. These carnival festivities are inaugurated on a Sunday in January or February as the central day, when the population is gathered in the squares of their towns. There, teams or groups of young men and women are created in order to participate in the pukllay or Andean carnival games.

The pukllay is developed in two stages. First, the players usually throw water, paint, and corn flour at themselves, as well as many fruits that represent fertility. The second stage consists of competitions to test their strength, ability, and endurance; and based on this, they will be allowed to choose their future partner. During these activities, we realize that dance, music, and food constitute unique components that also promote the closeness of young couples who actively participate during the celebrations.

Physical competitions and duels among men have a great significance in the population. It is believed that if a man manages to overcome these challenges, he is able to assume responsibility for his family and make sacrifices for it, which is something that the Chopcca woman always seeks after in her desire to raise a family. Besides, the young Chopcca man achieves distinction and respect among other men of the same age.

On the next day, in the early hours of Monday, the wasikay or visit to the houses of the major chiefs is performed, with the aim of offering them a greeting accompanied by whistles and drums. Then, during the day, a series of rituals and offerings to the pachamama or mother earth is carried out with the purpose of protecting the animals, and freeing them from any diseases, theft of cattle, and envy. Another ritual conducted on this day is the branding of the cattle by means of a cut in the ears; and even during this ritual, a paring ceremony of two calves is usually carried out. After mated, the Chopccas made them chew quinoa so that the animals can improve their reproductive capacity.

On Tuesday, the aychakuchuy or cut of the meat is carried out. It means that it is time to prepare a kind of stew made with cabbage and meat (legs and ribs of llama). Later, the butler or godfather of the celebration shares this delicious stew with the visitors and the parades that continue celebrating the carnivals.

Wednesday, also known as Ash Wednesday, is the last day for celebrating the carnivals. On this day, the wamani is practiced. It is a ritual that consists of delivering a living llama to the hill, asking for the protection of the animals with this offering. Finally, the carnival culminates with horse races organized in each Chopcca town.

The Branding

The Branding, also known as Santiago because of the coincidence with the catholic calendar, is celebrated every July 25th. On this date, the branding of cattle, sheep, and camelids begins, labor in which all the Chopccas collaborate by performing rituals aimed at the Apus (sacred mountains) and the pachamama (mother earth) to favor the fertility of soils and animals.

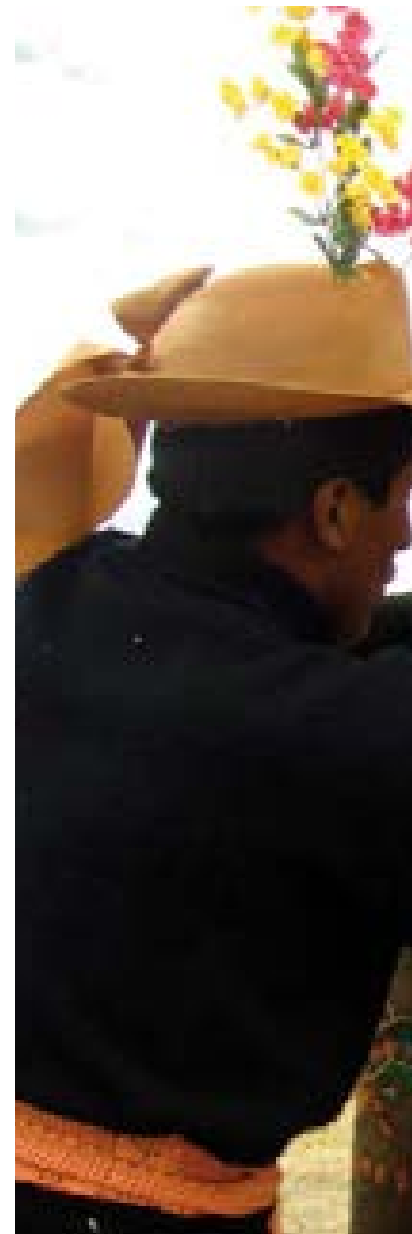
This celebration begins three or four days in advance, with the active participation of chiefs in the coordination and arrangements: the ribbons for adorning the animals are bought, and the stew for sharing in the community is cooked. In addition, the sons-in-law look for the waylla, a straw or type of ichu (grass) of great resistance used especially during cattle rituals. It is useful to mark the ritual area and decorate hats.

On the night of July 24th, the vigil (velakuy in Quechua) begins. In each house, a ritual table is set up, on which all the implements that will be used in the propitiation (branding) of the cattle are placed: the ribbons that will be placed on the ears of the cattle, corn grains, the Ila mpu or toasted rice and sugar, quinoa, the wanzu or figures of a cow and a bull, some liqueurs, red flowers, colored stones and even coins, and coca leaves. Each one of

these elements represents fertility, abundance, food, and the protection of animals. During the vigil, the inhabitants gather, drink, and even dance and chacchan or chew coca leaves. Moreover, some parades walk the streets, while visiting the houses and carrying small crosses adorned with colored ribbons and with an instrument made out of the horns of the bull, known as tinya or waqrapuku.

At midnight, the pagapu, which is the first offering to the pachamama and the apus (gods) of the region, is carried out. This offering is generally made by the patron or owner of the cattle known as yachaq, who must dig a small hole on the side of the hill, representing a door that allows him to deliver the offering to the apu or sacred mountain to gain its protection. Then, the stables of the animals are walked, while spreading the llampu or ground corn prepared on the eve as an offering to the pachamama, so that it allows them to start the branding of the cattle.

In the early morning of July 25th, the community members enter the stables lighting with lit straws to represent the shearing of animals. This practice will help avoid dangers, such as diseases and death of their cattle. After this ritual, breakfast with tripe, a traditional



“The branding of cattle, sheep, and camelids”

soup made with peeled corn, chuño or dried potato, and par-boiled beef and pork, is shared.

At mid-morning, the vakalaqay or branding begins to the sound of the tinya played by the patron. The single young men or young horsemen lead the cattle to their branding, as a demonstration of

their ability to take the animals by the horns. They are in charge of adorning the ears of the cattle (cows and bulls) with ribbons, whose colors are chosen by each family and function as identification marks for avoiding their loss or theft. Then, the chiku chiku is performed; activity in which the elderly women spread the wallqa



In Chopcca, the young people that herd the cattle during the branding celebration are called chalanés.

Photography: Ministerio de cultura del Perú

¹Chicha is a fermented or not-fermented Peruvian beverage that is usually made with maize.

on the animals and people with the aim of achieving the well-being and fertility of the cattle and people's prosperity.

The celebration ends with a dinner made with tripe, chicha¹, and liquor, amid dances that last all night long.

The vigawantuy

The *vigawantuy* is a celebration of communal tasks that are carried out for three days in August, between the second and third weekend of the month. The participants are the maqtas or single young men who feel motivated to impress, with their demonstrations of strength, single women in their communities, while these ones wear their best clothes for this celebration.

The tasks consist of felling and transport huge trunks of eucalyptus and alder from the forests for their future use in the construction of houses and community centers, bridges, and any other place needed by the inhabitants of each one of the 16 Chopcca communities that participate every year. Tiquerccasa is the most representative town of this celebration. Every year, more than five thousand men and women gather in the square of this community, where they dance, sing, eat, and drink alcohol in great quantity and without restrictions.

The development of the *vigawantuy* is conducted and coordinated by the



All the Chopcca community attends the vigawantuy of Tiquerccasa, a traditional activity, and accompanies the carriers from the woods to the town. Photography: Ministerio de cultura del Perú

Photography: Ministerio de cultura del Perú



inspectors and chiefs responsible for organizing the tasks and implementing rigorously a series of procedures established and practiced throughout the years. This way, tradition remains intact; it is handed down from generation to generation.

This celebration begins in the house of the chief, where a ritual that consists of sacrificing a pair of llamas is conducted. Then, the meat is used in the meals that are shared during the festivities. Additionally, the chiefs must provide the participants with coca leaves, liqueurs, cigars, and chicha made with barley, as well as other meals prepared by the wives.

When the night of the first day arrives, all the participants gather in the square of each town. Amid religious chants and music, a ritual in front of a wooden cross and a table is held. On the table, the axes and bows that will be used during the tasks are placed, as well as candles, coca leaves, cigars, and liquors. All these elements are consecrated before the cross.

Before starting the tasks, those who lead the groups of carriers summon the young participants from house to house and through the streets. Then, once they are chosen, it is decided who will be the leader of the tree carriers, and who will be the hachamaysu

or master in charge of the ax and the coca leaf and liquor that must be given to the participants. Once everyone is gathered in the town square, they head toward the forest at around three in the morning, surrounded by chants, music, and the sound of the tin-yas. By then, they are ready to arrive at the forest and start the tasks.

During the journey and the tree felling, they sing chants in Quechua, referring to the trees as female beings. Therefore, they offer trees a careful and respectful treatment throughout the entire vigawantuy, since there is a belief that the trunk that will be transported to town must accept to be carried first. In order to fulfill the task, a single woman is needed. She must hold a rope tied to the trunk, which would make the trunk lighter and easier to be carried on the way to town. Otherwise, if the woman is married, the tree will resist the carriage.

Once they arrive at forest in the morning, they take a breakfast made with potatoes, chili, and cancha or roasted corn. Later, they get ready to initiate the felling under the chosen tree, and start a ritual by placing a rug on the ground with all the implements on it, in order to ask the pachamama, amid chants, for a day without accidents or setbacks. Roel and Martínez (2013) describe it as follows:



“They sing chants in Quechua, referring to the trees as female beings”



The young generation participating in vigawantuy

Photography: Ministerio de cultura del Perú

Original chant in Quechua

*Huknin chayamun, qawapayawan
Huknin chayamun, rikupayawa
Chakiymanta umaykamam qawapayawan
Chakiymanta umaykamam rikupayawan
Qawapayawan.*

*Kallpachallata tapuykuptiyqa
Fuerzachallata kunaykuptiyqa
Kaynintataq, wahnintataq muyullawachkan
Kaynintataq, wahnintataq muyullawachkan
Muyullawachkan.*

Translation into English

One comes and stares at me
The other one comes and observes me
From head to toe, over and over
His eyes go from my head to my toes
Looks at me and looks.

If I ask vigorously
If I try hard to find it out
He walks around me here and there
He goes around in circles
He walks around.

The chiefs begin the task by chopping the tree with the ax for the first time, then the elders do it, and finally it is the youth's turn until felling the tree completely. Once they have all the felled trunks, they get ready to transport them to town. To this end, they need sticks and ropes that are attached transversely to each beam, which are separated by a distance of one and a half meters in between, creating a kind of a frame that facilitates carrying them by two columns of young people, one on each side of the chosen beams or trunks. On the way back, they walk with great care, avoiding contact with the beams all along the road across the mountains and hills, until reaching the town. The crowd, composed of the inhabitants of the communities, accompanies the carriers while

singing and giving them encouragement and strength to accomplish this difficult task.

Once they are near town, the kuchukancha is held. It is a ceremony conducted to ratify the chiefs who will be in charge of organizing and participating in the vigawantuy the following year. Afterwards, the carriers enter the main square of each town and place the beams standing in front of the church, in order to thank for a journey without accidents. After that, the dances and chants begin, as well as the consumption of liquor as a sign of joy. Moreover, they sing a song that expresses the satisfaction of the entire community. Its lyrics have also been collected by Roel and Martínez (2013):

Original song in Quechua

Kayqaya, kayqaya cumplykamunchik
Kayqaya, kayqaya cumplykamunchik
Watantin entero pensar pesarta
Watantin entero pensar pesarta.

Translation into English

Behold, behold, we have fulfilled,
 Behold, behold, we have fulfilled,
 The whole year of thinking eagerly
 The whole year of thinking eagerly.

These parties finish with the wankakuy or tap dance. It begins in the town square and continues in the house of the chiefs in charge of the celebrations each year.

As we can see, the Chopcca communities keep alive many traditions and beliefs throughout their history. In addition to their

celebrations, we can mention, for example, the healing practices of "cultural ills", which are not recognized as such or do not have scientific explanations in contemporary medicine. However, in the Chopcca communities, there are bonesetters (they use their hands in order to alleviate body ailments through massages and rubs), midwives (women who assist in

“The Chopcca communities keep alive many traditions and beliefs throughout their history”

childbirth), healers (they resort to prayers, chants, and smoke to invoke to the forces of nature to cleanse evil), and herbalists (experts in the healing properties of local plants; traditional herbal doctors who resort to their generational practices of using certain medicinal plants). Among the most common “ills” or “illnesses” requiring frequent treatments, we can mention:

The pacha, which occurs as a consequence of resting on the ground

of a sacred or prohibited place without having asked the pachamama for permission, for example, next to an important hill or apu. Its consequences can be the lack of appetite, change in skin color, and if not treated in time, death. The cure for this ill consists of making a payment to the land or pagapu, which is carried out by a healer through a ritual and offerings to the pachamama.

The gentle wayra is caused by picking up or stepping on the



Portrait of the inhabitants of the Chopcca community

Photography: Michael Lohse (2016)



An Andean girl wearing a traditional costume of the Chopcca community.

Photography: Michael Lohse (2016)

bones of the ancestors, known as gentles or grandparents. This makes them enter the body, causing the gentle wayra or intense pain in the body. To treat this ill, the healer must find the bones that started the ill and burned them through a ritual, throwing finally the aches into the river after apologizing to the offended gentles.

The puquio is an ill that is prone to appear in women and occurs when entering a puquio or spring when there is a rainbow. If the woman is eating, the ill enters the body through the food, causing a swelling of the stomach, loss of appetite, and insomnia. This ill can also be treated through a payment to the land or pagapu.

The fright is one of the well-known ills in Peru. Generally, it affects children as a consequence of a sudden or strong impact because of falls, accidents, fear, or terror. This ill manifests itself via diarrhea, lack of appetite, insomnia or startles when sleeping. According to beliefs, these symptoms appear because the child's soul leaves the body as a result of the strong impact. The fright is treated through prayers. Using coca leaves and cigars, the healer invokes the spirit in order to recover the child's soul (in other regions of Peru, an egg or an animal is rubbed on the body of

the child while praying, so that it absorbs the fright and sets free the affected person).

According to UNESCO, for a community to be declared intangible cultural heritage, it must comprise various elements as traditions or living expressions that have been inherited from their ancestors and passed on to their descendants, such as oral traditions, arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, as well as knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. In addition, in order to be recognized as a nation, it is required that an ethnic group or community shares a common language (the Chopccas speak the Quechua language), takes root in the same territory, has a system of government, celebrates festivities, and perpetuates distinctive traditions of the community.

Therefore, in 2014, the Chopcca nation was declared intangible cultural heritage of the Nation by the Ministry of Culture, granting this category for its representativeness and cultural, traditional differentiation that prevails from generation to generation.

“The fright is one of the well-known ills in Peru. Generally, it affects children as a consequence of a sudden or strong impact because of falls, accidents, fear, or terror”



Children showing Chopcca clothing.
Photography: Michael Lohse (2016)

Information of interest:

- Formerly, parents were the ones who chose the romantic partners of their descendants, who were forced to marry. Nowadays, the descendants can choose their own romantic partners.
- Low-alcohol drinks are the only ones allowed in celebrations because the community is mostly evangelical.
- They are used to dehydrating all kinds of potatoes and also dissecting beef, llama, or mutton. This method of food preservation is adopted because of food shortages caused by rain and frost. This way, they store enough food until the bad weather improves. This method is also useful for long trips.
- Chopcca clothing bears numerous meanings. Women and men wear flowers in their felt hats as a sign of singleness, and they also wear bold colors. Instead, married people wear opaque colors.
- The charm of the Chopcca woman or azucarcha is her voice. Singing is the best feature of an azucarcha and it is demonstrated through the harawis or regional chants.
- In the vigawantuy, men wear the chumpi, a belt that gives them strength and avoids injury and accidents when carrying the huge beams during the celebration.

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