

Decline of the Potency of Igbo Apprenticeship Scheme in Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract: The study-examined Igbo apprenticeship scheme in Anambra state. Its potency as it were, as it is and will be. The principal motivations of the scheme are the seed capital and mentorship given to the apprentices at the end of their indentureship and generation of employment in the state. But, the potency of the scheme is perceived to be waning. The study therefore seeks to interrogate the perceived decline of the potency of the scheme, utilising the observation method in informal workplaces and trading sites spread across the state. The study discovered that, the unwillingness of young men to take up the businesses of their fathers, study courses that will promote their growth and malicious stealing of their masters money by the apprentices are key factors that led to the decline of the scheme's potency and the study therefore recommended that young men should key into family businesses so as to promote the heritage of business sustainability being transferred from generation to generation. Again, there should be a well-defined contractual agreement rather than oral agreement between the masters and the intending apprentices so as to protect the job creation intent of the scheme.

Keywords: Igbo apprenticeship scheme, Potency and Employment generation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Apprenticeship is a system for training a new generation of practitioners of a trade or profession with on-the-job training. Apprenticeships can also enable practitioners to gain a license to practice in a regulated occupation. Most of their training is done while working for an employer who helps the apprentices learn their trade or profession, in exchange for their continued labor for an agreed period after they have achieved measurable competencies. Apprenticeship lengths vary significantly across sectors, professions, roles and cultures. In some cases people who successfully complete an apprenticeship can reach the "journeyman" or professional certification level of competence.

Olulu & Udeorah (2018) posits that apprenticeship may be considered as a system of learning whereby an individual trained in a professional skill in a practical way through a structured program of on the-job training. It usually involves acquiring knowledge, mechanical skills and the development of an attitude or discipline for a particular job.

Orugun & Nafiu (2014) opines that apprenticeship provides a ladder of opportunity to obtain critical skills businesses require to flourish, placing apprenticeship as the seedbed of entrepreneurship. He further stated that, the combination of

these attributes, the business and entrepreneurial activities of the Igbos continue to be the backbone of commerce and manufacturing in the Nigerian economy.

The apprenticeship practice is in three categories viz; the traditional model, the informal model and the modern apprenticeship model. The traditional model involves the transfer of family skill to the next generation of members, while the informal model though traditional in nature, have non-family members engage in the apprenticeship scheme. The modern apprenticeship scheme involves training of participants in vocational skills, well-structured programme of learning, fixed working/training hours and combination of vocational training with educational programmes. In Nigeria, the practice of apprenticeship is popular among the Nupes, Igbos, Fulanis and other tribes that have specialised skills which they pass on from generation to generation. Trades in apprenticeship category in Nigeria includes; blacksmith, welding, trading, block moulding, motor mechanics and repair, barbing, electronics repair, wood carving amongst others.

The apprenticeship system practiced among the Igbo ethnic group is arranged in such a way that the apprentice lives with his master so as to acquire through a process of acculturation the necessary attitude, diplomacy and decorum required for the trade or skill acquisition, usually for an agreed number of years after which the master settles the apprentice by setting up a business for him, that is provision of startup capital and the required guidance up until certain level of business maturity. It is the combination of these dispositions that make graduates of Igbo apprenticeship scheme entrepreneurs instead of job seekers.

(Neuwirth, 2017) stated that Igbo apprenticeship system that governs Alaba International Market is the largest business incubator platform in the world. As laudable as Igbo apprenticeship system has been, especially from early 1970s up until late 2010s. Can the system still be seen as a glowing bulb or is the luminosity of the bulb waning? Hence the impetus for this study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Igbo apprentice system is an extension of their entrepreneurial make-up where a strategic training process is utilised to train mostly young men of igbo stock into entrepreneurial ventures by established entrepreneurs locally

known as Oga, (Ejo-Orusa2019). This venture can be a trade, an enterprise or a vocation, in some cases serving also as a domestic help. The Ogas are former apprentices that had served and were settled with seed capitals to begin their own enterprises (Alike & Umunze 2019). This system is informal and has unstructured training programs to learn and master skills required to embark on own enterprise

The Igbo culture of entrepreneurship can be traced back to the slave trade business from the 15th century. By 1800s about 320,000 Igbos have been sold at Bonny, as well as 50,000 at Calabar and Elem Kalabari (Isichei, 1976; Adamu, 1979; Lander & Lander, 1832). This process continued until the abolition of slave trade in the 1900s. Unlike most African communities, slaves from the Igbo ethnic group were exposed to entrepreneurship by their owners trading commodities like spices, sugar, tobacco, cotton for export to America, Europe and Asia, Ohadike(1998). This action kindled the entrepreneurship spirit of the Igbo people and galvanized them to quickly venture into various forms of entrepreneurship during the pre-colonial era, (Iwara, Amaechi & Netshandama 2019). The colonial era met the Igbos as the leading exporters of palm oil and kernel, craftsmen, traders, merchants, cottage industrialists, etc. This culture of entrepreneurship has been sustained till the present age through the apprenticeship framework.

A case study of where it worked is in Chinese concepts known as the family chain referral entrepreneurship framework. This structure is confined within households where innovations were jointly establishment and operated by family members (Feldman, 1992; Hamel, 2010; Graupp & Wrona, 2015). It takes a form of snowball approach which begins with a small unit to a larger segment in the long run. Culturally, the setup is spearheaded by the head of household who revolve to incorporate the children and grandchildren (Kristiansen, 2004; Neuman, 2011; Upton McLaughlin, 2013; Rui, 2014). The family enterprise concept is among the few moral and ideological approach to survive the decade-long turmoil, and bedlam of the “Cultural Revolution” which is relatively unscathed in China (Kristiansen, 2004; Zuwarimwe, 2009). Because the enterprise is designed for the benefit of the family, members collaborate to render sincere efforts to achieve family set-goals.

Alike & Orjiako-Umunze (2019) posits that the Igbo apprenticeship scheme is essential in generating business ideas, business location and capital for start-ups.

Onyima, Nzewi & Chiekezie (2017) interrogated the effects of apprenticeship and social capital on new business creation process of Igbo “Immigrant” entrepreneurs in Wukari Taraba State using descriptive statistics. The study revealed that while apprenticeship had significant effects on pre-funding activities- when the business was taking off, social capital became important when the business had been established. Apprenticeship had significant effects on business idea generation, idea modification, business location and financing

while social capital served as source of insurance services and access to information.

Orugun & Nafiu (2014) in a study, assessed whether the entrepreneurial behaviours of the Igbos encourage Nigeria’s economic growth. The study ascertained if the Igbo apprentice model practiced was a contributory factor to their business success. Applying descriptive statistics, the study also reported that the entrepreneurial behaviours of the Igbos are a panacea for the country’s economic growth and the entrepreneurship model is very instrumental to their business success.

The Nature of Igbo Apprenticeship scheme

The Igbo apprenticeship scheme is practiced in Anambra state majorly in towns such as: Onitsha, Nnewi, Awka, Ekwuluobia, Obosi amongst others. The latent drivers of the scheme are the clan-based system of brotherhood (Umu nna), co-prosperity and interdependence. A clan is a group of people connected by kinship and descent. The Igbo business clan, a replica of the ancient Igbo culture and tradition evidence of the African cooperative nature, made up of united entrepreneurs who share the same mentor or master, either directly or indirectly. These groups of people set up their businesses within the same location (localisation of industry), at the same time bringing resources together to procure goods. This system serves the advantage of a cooperative society. The clan makes decisions about the uniform prices of commodities so that, irrespective of the shop a buyer goes to, the price is the same. The only advantage of one clan member over another is goodwill and customer relationship.

In the Igbo clan system, members are more like family and not competitors. When one clan member has a commodity, every other member logically has it too. This is because any shop owned by a clan member logically belongs to every other clan member. The primary goal of a clan’s business localisation is to establish a market of their own. Therefore, most Igbo traders do not depend on finding an established market but on forming their own business clan and then a market for themselves. The clan system of business structure associated with the Igbos has roots in their primitive society when families and clans owned land, the primary means of production, and that shared ownership was distinguished by its collectivism than individualism (Osiri, 2020). Till date, the Igbos’ communal perspective is evident in their tradition of business clustering. Computer Village in Ikeja Lagos State, Onitsha main market, Alaba international market Lagos, Ariria Market-China of Africa Aba Abia State, Idumota Market Lagos, and Nkwo Nnewi Market-Japan of Africa in Anambra state – major Igbo markets in Nigeria – are clustered with members looking out for each other, fostering their business practices, and incubating new entrepreneurs. The Igbos see every business clan as a family, and perceive the world as a marketplace (uwa bu ahia), the Igbos do not joke about the values of sacrifice and hard work, integrity and

honesty, kindness and co-prosperity, truth and guidance (Osiri, 2020).

Types of Igbo apprenticeship scheme

The scheme has 3 major types: Igba-boi also known as Igba Odibo (become an apprentice), Imu Oru also known as Imu Oruaka (learn a craft) and Imu Ahia (learn a trade). The term 'Igba-boi' in this context does not literally mean "to serve another" in the literal sense of the word, whereby the only purpose is total servitude to the master. The Igbo Igba-boi model is a process whereby someone is being trained in the act of entrepreneurship (Agozino & Anyanike, 2007). While all types are geared toward the transfer of knowledge of entrepreneur skills, they differ in approach.

Igba Odibo/ Boi (Apprenticeship)

Under the Igba Odibo type of Igbo apprenticeship scheme, the parent or guardian has agreed with their child or ward on their choice of profession, and will consciously seek for successful entrepreneurs in that particular profession for his training. There is often a brief traditional handing-over ceremony of the apprentice, to his master (Oga). In the ceremony, an oral indentureship agreement based on trust and credibility will be entered into in which the conditions and terms will be spelt out. The agreement comes in two ways; one, the intending apprentice will live with the master for the number of years agreed upon, two, that the Oga will train the apprentice in his trade with all sincerity and settle him with a seed capital to start his own business at the end of the agreed number of years. Traditional kolanuts and palm wine are shared with a Christian prayer or traditional rituals. This is normally to bless the occasion and ensure a smooth hand-over of the young boy to the master. The young apprentice is also advised by both his parents and elders that are present on the virtues of honesty, hard work, obedience and respectfulness to his new boss. At the end of the brief traditional handing-over ceremony, the apprentice is expected to go home with the master, to start his indentureship journey. The apprentice in the Igbo apprentice scheme is expected to live with the master and his family throughout the period of his indentureship. The apprentices are not just apprentices in the strict sense of the word; they are also an integral part of his Oga's household. They are set to begin teaching and learning process, he is expected to do minor chores, taught the basic ways of living, against what he may have known before now. The next step is to initiate the apprentice into the science of entrepreneurship and innovation. This normally happens within the first three months of the apprentice's arrival. These early months in the process serves as a trial period, during which the apprentice's suitability for the training and other roles would have been tested. Within this period, the apprentice is expected to follow the master and (probably other older apprentices) to learn the rudiments of the scheme through which the master gives the judgment as to whether he should continue.

Three main issues pivotal for determining whether the apprentice stays or is sent home after the first three months

are: the "willingness to learn," "resilience" and "trustworthiness". The apprentices that make it through this first stage often demonstrate the willingness to learn. It is this willingness that gets them the possibility to continue their training. The apprentice is taught basic strategies such as: customer negotiation, how to maximize entrepreneurial opportunities; the act of building a good customer relationship, as well as transaction process. The apprentice is also encouraged to develop certain unique skills that help them deal with the dynamics of their growth and development process.

At about two years before the end of the number of years agreed for his apprenticeship, the master allows the apprentice to work with minimal supervision, similar to an examination. After passing this test, the apprentice is then ready for 'settlement'. At the end of the agreed period, there is usually a freedom party which serves as a graduation and commencement ceremony for the erstwhile apprentice to start his business sojourn called "Idu-uno". At the ceremony, the master settles him with a seed capital to enable him to establish his own trade and promise of still providing him with the required mentorship up until a certain level of business maturity. The family of the apprentice does not pay the master any premium for the training. The period of 'Igba odibo' lasts between 4-8 years depending on the agreed duration.

After the settlement period, the apprentice becomes a certified member of their local trade union and can fully utilise the business network that was formed during the training period, acquiring goods on credit from his former master who invariably become a guarantor to his former apprentice who is now an Oga to also obtain goods on credit from other suppliers that is leveraging on his master's influence. Once, he sets the ball rolling in his business, in most cases he manages his business alone for about six months or less depending on the nature of his business and level of capital to key his now new business to a trading track that is making all the necessary supply contacts and widening his customer base before getting an apprentice to stay under his tutelage and the cycle continues. The cyclic nature of the Igbo apprenticeship system is adjudged to be the largest business incubator platform in the world (Neuwirth, 2017).

The nature of operation of the scheme is not all about the relationship between an Oga and his apprentice(s), but a holistic dynamic of relationships, between an individual Oga and the entire apprentices within the trade cluster and an individual apprentice with all the Ogas also within the trade cluster. There is also an inter trade cluster relationship between the Ogas and apprentices of different trade clusters which greatly impacts positively on the apprentices upon gaining their freedom in terms of sourcing supplies. Again, hierarchical relationship amongst apprentices is strictly observed, especially where they are more than one apprentice in terms of roles at shop and chores at home.

Imu Oruaka and Imu Ahia (To learn a skill or craft/trade)

Another way of becoming an apprentice under the Igbo scheme of customary apprenticeship is through 'imu oru aka'. Here the apprentice is given to a master craftsman to be under his tutelage. Unlike the Igba-boi/Igba Odibo where an apprentice will be trained for free for a period of pre-agreed years, in the Imu Oru/Imu Oruaka and Imu Ahia types tutorship are paid for by the apprentice's parents/sponsors, Iwara et al (2019). The payment is usually accompanied with some drinks meant for the entertainment of witnesses who are usually tradesmen within the environment in which the trade or craft is to be learnt. The fee is usually a lump sum of money paid before the training is commenced. The apprentice in this case does not live with the master within the period of the training. The master only blesses the apprentice at the end of the successful completion of the training and provides the new master with technical guide up until a certain level of business maturity. The master may employ the apprentice if his family is not able to establish him immediately. The time frame for 'imu oru aka/ imu ahia' is usually 2-5 years depending on the nature of the trade or craft.

In both types of apprentices under Igbo apprenticeship scheme, the progress and respect of the terms and conditions of the indentureship by both parties are supervised by both the master and the apprentice's family, and that probation period applies in both cases

Benefit of the Igbo apprenticeship scheme

If there is something that has worked in Nigeria, it is the Igbo apprenticeship system. It is the reason why southeastern Nigeria is considered the region in Nigeria with the highest level of human wellbeing (not necessarily education attainment which is not exclusive) by the United Nations. (UN Human Security and Human Development Report, as quoted in Ekekwe, 2019)

The Igbo people or the Igbos have a rich network of economically prosperous citizens whose business models has attracted considerable attention recently from researchers, policymakers and practitioners alike (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017; Ekekwe, 2019).

The value of the Igbo business model became most apparent at the aftermath of the 1967–1970 Nigerian/Biafran civil war. The war left the region depleted of basic infrastructure and amenities. The endless list of successful business individuals had to start from nothing and built all over again (Falola, Afolabi, & Ades 2008).

Igbo apprenticeship scheme has the best practical business networking, less vulnerability to business uncertainties, reduction of market search-related transaction costs, the creation and utilization of social capital (trust), access to collateral-free credit, collective business expansion and job creation (Ichoku, 2019).

According to Forbes, the town of Nnewi, in the southeastern state of Anambra, either by good fortune or hard work, has bred more naira billionaires than any other town in Nigeria, and possibly Africa(Forbes, 2017).

The Igbos, who sometimes refer to themselves as the 'Jews of Africa', have entrepreneurship in their blood. They have built themselves from the ground up, with a little help from the government, after a controversial policy left them all with 20 pounds each, regardless of their bank balance, at the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970. (Forbes, 2017)

According to Onwuka (2015) powerful entrepreneurs in Igbo land such as Innoson Motors, Coscharis Motors, Chisco Motors, A-Z Petroleum/Chicason Group as well as Dangote in the Northern Nigeria and a host of others had an apprenticeship glimpse. Even though most of them had poor backgrounds, without formal western education, this entrepreneurship approach offered a "foothold to rise to wealth" (Onwuka, 2015).

Challenges of the Igbo apprenticeship scheme

A challenge of the Igbo apprenticeship scheme in its early practice is the absence of classroom work and reading. Consequently, certificates are not issued for successful completion of the training.

Igbo Apprenticeship scheme sometimes takes in mavericks and rejects, hoping to give them a future. According to Adekola (2013) one major problem of Igbo apprenticeship scheme is that, it is generally believed to be meant for people who cannot do well in the formal education system or those whose parents cannot afford to sponsor their education. This particular problem makes it difficult to attract young graduates and youths of school age into the system. It is assumed that people undergoing apprenticeship are the 'never do wells' and they are not given the deserved respect like their counterparts in the formal school system.

Dismissing of an apprentice suddenly after several years, for filthy reasons. Like; accusation of theft, affairs with the master's wife, or being disobedient to justify their action. This could be very frustrating to the apprentice from a poor family background as some might have difficulty in sourcing startup capital to support their dream enterprise.

Another challenge of Igbo apprenticeship scheme is the issue of settling the apprentice at the end of his indentureship, leading to abuse and shirking of duties by masters and this demonstrates lack of adequate legal protection for young apprentice, because of the fact that the contract arrangement was verbally, it will be difficult for the apprentice to file a case against his master. Thus, this becomes the basis for the legal framework that will adequately protect the master (Oga) and the apprentice (Boi) in their contract.

Unwillingness of young men to take up the businesses of their fathers and study courses in the universities that will grow and nurture their fathers' businesses to the next level.

Malicious stealing of the Oga's money by the Boi(s) through various channels like;

- (a) Deliberate taking away of money from the money drawer without recording it in any of the books used for business transaction leading to the Oga's inability to trace the purpose of such cash movement.
- (b) Under disclosure of the proceeds of transactions especially the ones from "Oso-afia"; that is, goods supplied to a customer from another dealer's shop that naturally does not belong to the Oga.
- (c) Deliberate over supplying of goods to a customer with the intention of profiting from it.
- (d) Deliberate divulging of information concerning your Oga's sources of supplies and customers to his opponents with the intention of profiting from it.

Apprenticeship Contract Under Labour Law in Nigeria

The law of contract of apprenticeship in Nigeria is regulated by the Labour Act 2004. S. 50 (1) of the Labour Act requires that every contract of apprenticeship must be in writing and attested to by an authorised Labour Officer before it can be valid in law. The requirement of a written contract of apprenticeship undoubtedly excludes customary rules and practices. To be valid, the contract of apprenticeship must be attested and made with the approval of an authorised officer who must satisfy himself of the following conditions: First, that the consent of the apprentice has not been obtained by fraud, coercion or under influence or as a result of misrepresentation or mistake. Second, that the apprentice has been medically examined and certified by a qualified medical practitioner to be physically and mentally fit to be employed and trained in the employment specified in the contract. Thirdly, that the parties to the contract have fully understood the terms of the contract before signing it or otherwise indicating consent. Furthermore, that the provision has been made in the contract as to the manner in which any remuneration in cash or otherwise due to the apprentice shall be determined and as to the scale of increase in remuneration during the course of apprenticeship. Finally, the provision made in the contract for adequate shelter and provision of basic amenities for the apprentice, as well as ensuring that the contract is in accordance with any regulations made by the minister in-charge of labour.

Under the Nigerian Labour Law, there are two categories of apprentices; first, is the children apprentice between the ages of 12-16 years. This category of children can only be apprenticed to a master by their parents, or in the case of an orphan, by his guardian. The law officer shall appoint a fit and proper person to act on his behalf as a guardian. The second category of apprentices comprise of young persons of sixteen years and above. The category of apprentices may lawfully apprentice themselves out to a master. From the provisions of the Labour Act, the minimum age at which a person can enter into apprenticeship is 12 years. This requirement allows for the child to obtain some basic formal education like primary

school before entering into an apprenticeship to acquire vocational skills. The Labour Act also sets a limit as the maximum duration of apprenticeship which is put at five years, without any possibility for a renewal or an extension. At the end of the five years, the contract of apprenticeship automatically lapses irrespective of whether or not the apprentice has finished learning the art or trade. Where a dispute arises between the parties, a magistrate court or district court is vested with the jurisdiction to hear and determine any question arising out of the apprenticeship.

The fracture here is the exclusion of customary rules and practices from the umbrella of the apprenticeship contract under labour law in Nigeria. Hence, the study's submission is that Igbo apprenticeship scheme as a customary practice if brought under the apprenticeship contract under labour law in Nigeria will do a lot more good, especially making the parties respect and keep to the terms of the contract they have entered into and stipulations of the consequences that awaits any if there should be any default.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on social exchange theory (SET), which Homans (1961, p. 13) defined as the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two parties. Cost was viewed primarily in terms of alternative activities or opportunities foregone by the actors involved. Social exchange theory (SET) is among the most influential conceptual paradigms for understanding workplace behavior. Although different views of social exchange have emerged, theorists agree that social exchange involves a series of interactions that generate obligations (Emerson, 1976). Within SET, these interactions are usually seen as interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person (Blau, 1964). SET also emphasizes that these interdependent transactions have the potential to generate high-quality relationships.

One of the basic tenets of SET is that relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments. To do so, parties must abide by certain "rules" of exchange. Rules of exchange form a "normative definition of the situation that forms among or is adopted by the participants in an exchange relation" (Emerson, 1976: 351). Meaning that, rules and norms of exchange are "the guidelines" of exchange. Thus, the use of SET in models of organizational behavior is framed on the basis of the exchange rule. Most of management research focuses on expectations of reciprocity which is our concern here.

Reciprocity as interdependent exchanges. To understand interdependence, a party can have at least three postures to another person (cf. Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961):

- a. independence (outcomes are based entirely on one's solo effort),
- b. dependence (outcomes are based entirely on the other's effort), and

- c. interdependence (outcomes are based on a combination of parties' efforts).

Notice that complete independence and complete dependence do not imply a social exchange, as such. This is because an exchange requires a bidirectional transaction—something has to be given and something returned. For this reason, interdependence, which involves mutual and complementary arrangements, is considered a defining characteristic of social exchange (Molm, 1994).

As an abstraction from the theory, the Igbo apprenticeship scheme, where both the Oga and apprentice exchange their activities both tangible and intangible in terms of provision of platform by the Oga for the apprentice to learn his desired skill in exchange for the services, errands and chores that are undertaken by the apprentice in the course of learning his desired skill or trade.

The series of interactions of duties and responsibilities by both the Oga and the apprentice as spelt out orally in their agreement that culminate into obligations according to (Emerson, 1976) also lent credence to social exchange theory (SET) which is framed on the basis of reciprocity as interdependent exchanges that led to the growth of a business concern involving an Oga and nwaboi, and the size of seed capital the Nwaboi will receive from his Oga at the end of his indentureship as “Idu-uno” are dependent on the combined effort of both the Oga and the apprentice. It is this interdependence of both of them (Oga and Boi) that is bidirectional transaction that is required for social exchange to take place.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has profiled the decline of the potency of Igbo apprenticeship scheme and come up with the following solution to keep the potency of the scheme afloat and prevent the luminosity of the scheme's bulb from waning. The study therefore recommends that;

(1) Children should be encouraged to take up family business as a solution to the unwillingness of young people to take up the businesses of their fathers. When young men key into the businesses of their fathers and study courses in the universities that will enhance and reposition the trades or business concerns of their fathers, it will act as a new tonic to the old wine. With the new flavor of performance and dignity of labour which will impact positively on the general operation and output of the concerns. The aggregated values of these business units and their cyclic nature will help in employment generation and poverty reduction in the state.

(2) Institutionalization of legal framework. This will guide the parties under the Igbo apprenticeship scheme so as to ensure the existence of a valid contract between the master (Oga) and apprentice (Nwaboi) which will ensure that duties and responsibilities by both parties are adhered to, otherwise consequences will be ensured.

A contract is an agreement made between two or more persons which the law will enforce (Abiola, 2005). In other words, contract is a set of promises between two or more persons, which the law will enforce. Enforceability implies that if a party fails to honour or discharge his promise, the other party may take action to enforce it in a court of law (Sagay, 1985).

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