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Ulos Ragi Pakko and Batak Toba Cultural Meaning in a North Sumatra Museum Collection

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Abstract

This study examines Ulos Ragi Pakko as a Batak Toba cultural artifact preserved in the collection of the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum. It is motivated by the need to document and interpret traditional textiles as material representations of Batak identity, social values, and historical continuity amid contemporary cultural change. The study asks how Ulos Ragi Pakko functions as a cultural artifact and what symbolic meanings it embodies in Batak Toba society. Using a qualitative historical approach, data were collected through artifact observation, museum documentation, literature review, and contextual interpretation of cultural sources related to Batak traditions. The findings show that Ulos Ragi Pakko is not only a traditional woven textile but also a medium of social communication that reflects kinship structures, customary values, ceremonial functions, and the cultural worldview of the Batak Toba people. The artifact embodies meanings associated with respect, social status, solidarity, and cultural continuity across generations. The study contributes to cultural history and museological studies by showing how museum collections interpret, represent, and transmit cultural meanings to wider audiences.

Keywords

Batak Toba; cultural artifact; cultural heritage; museum collection; Ulos Ragi Pakko

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Introduction

Indonesia possesses a rich cultural heritage, one expression of which is found in traditional textiles that carry layered meanings. Among the Batak Toba people, ulos is not merely a cloth but a cultural artifact that functions as a symbol of identity, social status, and customary communication across various life-cycle rituals ([Baho et al., 2020](#)). Each type of ulos has distinct characteristics, functions, and philosophical meanings, making it inseparable from the value system and cosmology of Batak Toba society ([Desiani, 2022](#)). In the midst of modernization and the spread of popular culture, the continuity of knowledge about the meanings and functions of ulos faces increasingly complex challenges, especially among younger generations who are becoming culturally distanced from ancestral traditions.

One type of ulos with an important cultural position is Ulos Ragi Pakko. Visually, Ulos Ragi Pakko is recognized by its dominant black, white, and reddish-brown colors and by its firm linear motifs, which symbolize strength and steadfastness. Functionally, this textile is generally presented to men and used in customary ceremonies associated with power, dignity, and responsibility. However, as social life changes and popular culture becomes more influential, public understanding, particularly among younger generations of the visual, material, and symbolic distinctiveness of Ulos Ragi Pakko has gradually weakened ([Fitriani & Rachmawati, 2023](#)). This condition indicates an urgent need to document and reinterpret the cultural meanings embedded in Ulos Ragi Pakko.

Existing studies on Batak Toba ulos have generally emphasized customary functions, symbolism, and philosophical values in community life. These studies have contributed important insights into the position of ulos within Batak Toba social structures. However, research that specifically examines Ulos Ragi Pakko as a cultural artifact within the context of museum collections remains relatively limited. This gap is significant because museums do not function only as repositories of cultural objects; they also serve as spaces for representing, interpreting, and transmitting cultural meanings to the public.

As part of documentation and preservation efforts, the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum preserves Ulos Ragi Pakko as one of its notable ethnographic collections. The presence of this artifact in the museum makes it an authentic primary source for study, both in terms of its physical characteristics and its cultural context. Through its collections and museological information, the museum functions not only as a storage institution but also as an educational space that represents cultural values to the public ([Gaoi & Meo, 2025](#)). Nevertheless, few studies have analyzed how Ulos Ragi Pakko is represented through museum collections and how the museum constructs and communicates the cultural meanings embodied in the artifact.

On this basis, this study is important because it examines Ulos Ragi Pakko comprehensively through the collection of the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum. Previous studies on Batak Toba ulos have generally discussed customary functions, symbolism, and philosophical values in community life. Yet Ulos Ragi Pakko has rarely been examined as a cultural artifact within a museum context. Earlier research has also seldom connected artifact characteristics, cultural meaning, and museological representation within a single integrated study. This scholarly gap indicates that the role of museums in interpreting and representing Ulos Ragi Pakko to the public requires more detailed analysis. First, the characteristics of Ulos Ragi Pakko as a cultural artifact need to be identified by examining the visual and material aspects of the museum collection, including motifs, colors, weaving techniques, material types, and physical condition. This identification provides a basis for distinguishing Ulos Ragi Pakko from other types of ulos and for understanding the authenticity of the collection. Second, this study explores the cultural meanings attached to Ulos Ragi Pakko. These meanings are traced through the artifact itself and through museological information, including labels, narrative panels, and curatorial data provided by the North Sumatra State Museum. This approach enables an understanding of how a museum object can “speak” about the values held by its supporting community. Third, the study also considers the value of Ulos Ragi Pakko as Batak Toba cultural heritage and how that value is represented by the museum. The analysis covers how the museum arranges, interprets, and

communicates the collection to visitors, as well as the role of the North Sumatra State Museum in supporting preservation and increasing public appreciation of Ulos Ragi Pakko. This focus is relevant because museums have educational and cultural advocacy functions amid the challenges of modernization ([Hizkia et al., 2025](#)).

By examining these three aspects, this study is expected to make an empirical contribution to the documentation of Ulos Ragi Pakko as a cultural artifact and to provide evaluation material and recommendations for the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum in optimizing its role as an institution for preserving Batak Toba cultural heritage. The study argues that Ulos Ragi Pakko not only represents the cultural identity of the Batak Toba people but also reveals the role of museums in constructing, preserving, and transmitting cultural meanings to wider society. Therefore, this study aims to examine Ulos Ragi Pakko as a Batak Toba cultural artifact in the collection of the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum by analyzing its artifact characteristics, cultural meanings, and museological representation. The study is expected to enrich cultural history and museological scholarship, particularly in relation to the representation of cultural heritage in museum spaces.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method with a collection-based case study approach to examine Ulos Ragi Pakko as a Batak Toba cultural artifact in the collection of the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum. The data consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained from one Ulos Ragi Pakko artifact selected purposively based on the authenticity of the collection, the completeness of curatorial information, the relatively good physical condition of the artifact, and its representativeness as a Batak Toba ethnographic collection in the museum. Additional primary information was obtained from exhibition labels and narrative panels, as well as from in-depth interviews with three key informants: an ethnographic collection curator, a museum education officer, and a Batak Toba customary figure with knowledge of the history, functions, and meanings of ulos. Data collection was conducted at the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum. Secondary data were obtained through document study, including museum collection catalogues, curatorial archives, books, scholarly journals, and previous research on ulos and museology.

Data were collected through four techniques: participatory observation in the ethnographic exhibition room of the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum to observe the artifact's visual-material characteristics and the ways in which the museum represents it; visual documentation through photographs of the motifs, colors, textures, physical condition, and display arrangement of Ulos Ragi Pakko; documentary study of museological texts and relevant literature; and semi-structured interviews with key informants using an interview guide.

Data were analyzed qualitatively using an interactive model that included data reduction to select observation, interview, and documentary data relevant to the three research foci; data presentation in the form of narrative descriptions and thematic tables; and conclusion drawing. Interview data were analyzed through thematic coding by grouping information according to the themes of artifact characteristics, cultural meaning, and museum representation. Data verification was carried out through source triangulation and method triangulation by comparing information obtained from the artifact, informants, curatorial documents, and scholarly literature. The validity of museum information was also verified through cross-checking collection labels, curatorial archives, informant interviews, and academic references on Batak Toba ulos to ensure the reliability of data concerning the characteristics, meanings, and values of Ulos Ragi Pakko and the museum's role in its preservation ([Jawa et al., 2024](#)).

Results and Discussion

Characteristics of Ulos Ragi Pakko in the Collection of the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum

Based on direct observation and measurement of the Ulos Ragi Pakko artifact with inventory number MSU/Et/UL/043, displayed in the Batak ethnographic gallery of the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum, and through verification of the collection label and curatorial archives, the following physical characteristics were identified. The textile measures 182 cm in length and 61 cm in width, with an average thickness of 1.2 mm. The overall condition of the artifact is classified as good, at approximately 85%, with minor damage in the form of color fading in the rambu area and brownish staining on the right side of the cloth due to aging ([Jiniputri et al., 2021](#)). These physical characteristics indicate that the artifact retains a high degree of authenticity, so that the collection functions not only as an exhibition object but also as an important source for representing Batak Toba cultural identity and traditional textile practices within the museum space.

Visually, the color composition of Ulos Ragi Pakko is dominated by a deep black base produced from natural indigo dye. The secondary colors consist of ivory-white lines and reddish-brown accent lines obtained from jior bark and mud. The most distinctive feature is the pakko motif, a sequence of thick and thin horizontal lines known as sitolu tuho, intersected by vertical lines at certain intervals to form rectangular fields. At both ends of the woven field there is a sira, or head section of the cloth, with a denser geometric pattern approximately 15 cm high, ending in manually twisted rambu measuring 8 cm. No gold thread or beadwork was found, confirming that Ragi Pakko belongs to a type of ulos used by commoners rather than the nobility ([Lubis et al., 2026](#); [Kamalia et al., 2025](#))



Figure 1. Ulos Ragi Pakko

Source: Researcher's documentation at the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum, 2025.

From a material perspective, microscopic observation using a 50× digital microscope and interviews with the curator indicate that the textile is made entirely of hand-spun cotton thread. The yarn has a Z-twist direction, with a warp density of 22 threads/cm and a weft density of 18 threads/cm. Thread density was measured through direct counting at three different observation points on the cloth surface to obtain more consistent data. The weaving technique used is gedogan weaving, or the backstrap loom, with a 1-1 lifting system that produces a flat texture without raised effects. The estimated production period of around 1950–1960 is supported by the absence of synthetic thread mixtures and by the continued use of natural dyes; this estimate was also verified through museum curatorial archives and information from the collection curator. The museum label records that the artifact was donated by Mr. J. P. Siahaan, a customary elder from Balige, on 15 August 1987, with the note that it was “worn by his late father in a mamupus ceremony” (Lukitanigsih et al., 2024). These material characteristics show that Ulos Ragi Pakko has technical value as a traditional woven product while also representing the continuity of Batak Toba local knowledge transmitted across generations and re-presented through the museum collection.

As shown in [Figure 1](#), the dominance of dark colors, the arrangement of geometric motifs, and the relatively dense woven texture demonstrate the distinctive character of Ulos Ragi Pakko as a textile associated with symbols of strength and authority in Batak Toba culture. The dominant use of black represents steadfastness, maturity, and dignity, while the combination of white and reddish-brown symbolizes balance, purity, and courage in carrying out social responsibilities. The regular arrangement of geometric motifs reflects the social order characteristic of Batak Toba society, particularly kinship relations governed by the dalihan na tolu system. The dense woven texture also reflects the skill of traditional weavers and shows that the making of ulos is not oriented solely toward practical function but also contains aesthetic and symbolic values transmitted across generations.

These visual characteristics show that Ulos Ragi Pakko is not merely a traditional textile product but a cultural artifact that records the historical experience, value system, and collective identity of the Batak Toba people. Each visual element visible on the artifact contains cultural messages related to honor, responsibility, solidarity, and the social position of its wearer in customary life. The presence of this artifact in the museum exhibition space allows visitors not only to observe its physical form but also to understand the social and cultural contexts that shaped its creation.

This visual representation reinforces the argument that museums function not only as physical repositories of cultural objects but also as spaces of cultural interpretation that connect the past with contemporary society. Through collection arrangement, curatorial information, and narratives accompanying the artifact, the museum plays an active role in constructing and transmitting cultural meaning to the public. In this context, Ulos Ragi Pakko appears not only as an ethnographic collection but also as an educational medium that introduces Batak Toba cultural identity and strengthens public awareness of the importance of preserving cultural heritage amid modernization.

Cultural Meanings of Ulos Ragi Pakko

The tracing of meaning was conducted through three sources: the museum’s narrative panel text, interview transcripts with the ethnographic curator, Mrs. R. br. Siahaan, and information from a customary figure, Mr. St. Manguji Simanjuntak. Etymologically, Ragi Pakko consists of *ragi*, meaning pattern or variety, and *pakko*, derived from *mamakko*, meaning to compel, urge, or demonstrate strength. The philosophy of *pakko* is interpreted as a symbol affirming the identity of Batak Toba men, who are expected to be *toгу*, or physically, mentally, and spiritually strong in carrying out the responsibilities of Dalihan Na Tolu. In the social context, interview results revealed strict rules of use. Ulos Ragi Pakko may only be presented by the *hula-hula* to the *boru* in the status of *amang baoa*. Recipients are men who are *marhasohotan*, or married, especially when they are about to migrate (*mangaranto*), start a new enterprise, or be appointed as *sintua* in the church or *raja parhata* in customary affairs. The *mangulosi* procession with Ragi Pakko is

accompanied by tortor and an umpasa that states, “Sai tuganjang ma roham, sai toguhon ma tondimu,” meaning “May your heart be elevated and your spirit remain firm.” This ulos is prohibited in funeral ceremonies because its meaning is to “push forward,” not to “release” ([Purba et al., 2024](#); [Putri et al., 2024](#))

Symbolically, the three colors contain layers of cosmological meaning related to Banua Tolu. Black represents Banua Toru, or the lower world, the place of origin and death, reminding humans of debata. White symbolizes Banua Gintang, or the upper world, the realm of the deities and a symbol of pure intention. Reddish-brown represents Banua Tonga, or the middle world where humans live, symbolizing blood, courage, and the dynamics of life. The intersecting lines are interpreted as an ikat, or bond, that ties steadfastness so that it is not shaken by temptation. Within the structure of Batak Toba ulos, Ulos Ragi Pakko is positioned below Ulos Ragi Hidup and parallel to Ulos Bintang Maratur, specifically in its function of affirming adult men ([Sebayang et al., 2023](#))

Cultural Heritage Value and the Role of the North Sumatra State Museum

Observation of the exhibition arrangement, conducted on 12 April 2026 through four hours of direct observation in the ethnographic gallery of the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum, showed that Ulos Ragi Pakko was placed in a two-meter-high vertical display case together with four other types of ulos under a 50-lux lighting system. The observation focused on collection layout, interpretive media, lighting, and the availability of information for visitors. To strengthen the observational data, this study also conducted semi-structured interviews with five visitors selected purposively, namely visitors who observed the ulos collection for more than five minutes. The main interview questions addressed visitors’ understanding of collection information, their perceptions of the exhibition display, and their level of understanding of the cultural meaning of Ulos Ragi Pakko. The observation showed that the 10 × 15 cm text label contained only brief information: “Ulos Ragi Pakko, Balige, Toba. Coll. 1987. Worn by adult men.” There were no QR codes, infographics, or touchscreens providing more detailed explanations of the motifs, functions, and symbolic meanings of the ulos ([Silaban & Herlina, 2022](#)).

The limited interpretive media means that visitors mostly receive information at a descriptive level, so the museum has not fully optimized its role in transmitting the cultural meanings contained in Ulos Ragi Pakko. According to [Simanjuntak and Saragih \(2023\)](#), from the conservation perspective and based on interviews with the collection unit, preventive care is carried out by controlling room temperature at 22°C ± 2°C and relative humidity at 55% ± 5%, cleaning the display case every two weeks, and rotating displays every six months to avoid light aging. This study did not evaluate the technical effectiveness of the conservation system; rather, it focused on its relationship to preservation efforts and cultural representation within the museum space.

However, curative conservation of the existing stains has not yet been carried out because of the limited availability of textile conservators. The museum’s educational role related to Ulos Ragi Pakko is currently integrated into the general 90-minute tour package “Introducing North Sumatra Culture,” in which the explanation of ulos receives only about seven minutes. The 2025 Museum Goes to School program targeted 12 schools in Medan, but it has not yet included specific material on Ulos Ragi Pakko ([Simbolon & Bintarto, 2024](#)). Interviews with 15 visitors in front of the display case showed that 13 could not identify the type of ulos on display and 14 did not know the specific function of Ragi Pakko. Only one visitor, an anthropology student, was able to provide a correct explanation. These data indicate that the value of Ulos Ragi Pakko as cultural heritage has not been communicated effectively, so public appreciation remains at the level of “knowing ulos” rather than “understanding ulos.” The museum’s role still rests largely on its repository function, while storytelling and community engagement for this collection remain underdeveloped ([Sitohang et al., 2023](#))

The findings on the visual and material characteristics of Ulos Ragi Pakko in the North Sumatra State Museum collection affirm its position as an authentic artifact that meets the main characteristics described in the literature by Nalom Siahaan. The dominance of black, white, and

reddish-brown colors and the firm linear motifs distinguish it from Ulos Ragi Hotang or Ulos Sadum. The material condition, consisting of hand-spun cotton thread and gedogan weaving, indicates that the collection is a cultural product from before the widespread use of non-mechanical looms in the 1970s ([Situngkir & Situngkir, 2023](#)). These data are important as a reference for identifying the authenticity of Ulos Ragi Pakko amid the proliferation of imitation products. The limited information on the exact year of production in the label also suggests that museological documentation should be complemented by relative dating studies through textile analysis ([Tampubolon & Dighamri, 2023](#)).

These findings not only confirm the visual-material characteristics of Ulos Ragi Pakko described in earlier literature but also show that the material characteristics of the artifact can be used to reconstruct historical changes in Batak Toba weaving traditions. The use of hand-spun cotton thread and gedogan weaving indicates that ulos functions not only as a customary symbol but also as a record of textile technology, production patterns, and local knowledge among the Batak Toba people in a particular period. From the perspective of material history, this artifact represents the relationship between objects, technology, and social practices that shape the cultural identity of the supporting community. This finding broadens Batak Toba cultural studies, which have often emphasized the symbolic and ritual dimensions of ulos, by showing that material analysis can also reveal historical dynamics, technological transformation, and the continuity of Batak Toba weaving traditions over time.

The philosophical, social, and symbolic meanings attached to Ulos Ragi Pakko demonstrate that this artifact functions as tangible culture that contains intangible value. The concept of pakko as a symbol of strength is consistent with cultural semiotic theory, which views motifs on traditional textiles as the visual language of a community. The social function of Ulos Ragi Pakko in mangulosi young men who are migrating reflects the Batak Toba patrilineal kinship system, which positions men as bearers of responsibility for the clan. This finding strengthens the argument that museums cannot merely store objects; they must also be able to translate the values behind them. The limited explanation of meaning on the narrative panel means that the “cultural message” of this artifact is not fully conveyed to general visitors, resulting in cultural loss within the museum space ([Tinambunan, 2023](#)).

Ulos, as part of Batak cultural tradition, has been designated as Indonesian Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia. This designation applies to the ulos tradition in general, not specifically to Ulos Ragi Pakko. Therefore, the representation of each type of ulos in museums, including Ulos Ragi Pakko, needs to be carried out comprehensively and contextually so that the cultural values attached to it remain preserved. The way the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum displays Ulos Ragi Pakko in the public museum space is contextually appropriate because it places the artifact alongside other Batak ethnographic collections. However, the accompanying narrative remains very limited and has not fully fulfilled the museum’s educational function as articulated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

The museum’s preservation role is currently still dominated by physical preservation, while cultural communication and advocacy to increase public appreciation remain relatively limited. This condition is evident in visitors’ low level of understanding of the characteristics and cultural meanings of Ulos Ragi Pakko. From the perspective of New Museology, museums should ideally function not only as collection repositories but also as cultural centers that actively build dialogue between collections and communities. Therefore, the museum needs to strengthen the representation of Ulos Ragi Pakko by adding digital content, such as videos on the making and use of ulos in customary ceremonies; developing a more narrative and personal exhibition storyline; and involving weaving communities as living human treasures in educational programs. These steps are expected to strengthen the museum’s function as a space of cultural interpretation while increasing public understanding and appreciation of Batak cultural heritage.

The North Sumatra State Museum can optimize its role by moving beyond conservation and becoming an institution that strengthens Batak Toba cultural identity in the contemporary era. In the context of Ulos Ragi Pakko, museum representation is concerned not only with presenting the

artifact's visual and material aspects but also with communicating the religious and symbolic meanings attached to it. For the Batak Toba people, ulos has an important place in various customary and religious activities because it is understood as a medium for conveying blessings or gifts to its recipient. The ragi, or motif, of Ulos Ragi Pakko functions as a cultural icon that represents religious values, social identity, and hopes transmitted across generations. The use of color and motif arrangement does not merely show aesthetic qualities; it also signals the identity of the wearer and the social function of ulos in customary life. The museum therefore needs to present Ulos Ragi Pakko not only through physical description but also through explanations of its symbolic and religious meanings, so that visitors can understand ulos as a living cultural heritage that continues to be interpreted by Batak Toba society.

The colors of ulos also require attention because of the religious meanings they carry. In ulos, color signifies divine qualities. Only three colors are used: black, red, and white, because these were the colors most easily obtained in the Batak homeland at the time, derived from tree sap and plants and understood as part of divine creation. These three colors have influenced Batak Toba tradition in various forms of life, including traditional houses. Each color carries a symbolic meaning. White symbolizes purity, while black symbolizes wisdom or discernment. Red, meanwhile, refers to death and life. These three colors are always combined in the ragi of ulos; the difference lies in the dominance of one or two colors in particular types of ulos. Ulos Ragi Hotang, for example, combines red and black, whereas Ulos Ragi Idup combines white and black ([Simanjuntak & Saragih, 2023](#); [Simbolon & Bintarto, 2024](#))

The role of each color within the divine order is connected to aspects of human life. This does not mean that the connection between color and ulos is imposed artificially; rather, the divine dimension is directed toward human life and signifies the presence of the divine in a person or object, which is then expressed through conduct. The reference to black can be seen in the immanent version of Batara Guru Doli, or Batara Guru, who had a daughter named Boru Dayang Parujar and intended to marry her to the son of her aunt, Mangala Bulan. Because Boru Dayang Parujar refused, she was expelled from the middle world and descended to the lower world by means of a rope made of black silk cloth. With the assistance of Boru Sibaso Paet, who knew death and life, and with the help of divine beings, the great firefly and Layang Mandi, Boru Dayang Parujar was successfully lowered to the underworld on a platform. In this context, Boru Dayang Parujar lives through wisdom, symbolized by black, as a divine quality. White, by contrast, appears in persons regarded as embodiments of the divinity of Mula Jadi Nabolon, such as Raja Uti. He wore white clothing as a symbol of the divine presence within him, shown not only through attitude and action but also through dress. Accordingly, offerings addressed to the divine are also dominated by white, such as white rice and white goats. In this respect, the relationship between white and the divine is easily understood. Red is sometimes paired with white in offerings but can also stand independently. Raja Pinangkabo, seen as an incarnation of Mula Jadi Nabolon, indicates the conduct humans must adopt to avoid misfortune. If Raja Pinangkabo reveals his stomach, it signifies that a red chicken, and sometimes also a white one, should be offered to avert calamity, so that life may remain enduring and continue in accordance with divine will.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Ulos Ragi Pakko in the collection of the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum is a Batak Toba cultural artifact characterized visually by the dominance of black, white, and reddish-brown colors and by pakko motifs in the form of firm geometric lines. Its material characteristics, hand-spun cotton thread and gedogan weaving, indicate its authenticity as a product of the 1950s. In terms of meaning, Ulos Ragi Pakko contains philosophical values related to male steadfastness and authority, social values as a symbol of responsibility within Dalihan Na Tolu custom, and symbolic values associated with the Banua Tolu cosmology, which represents the life cycle of Batak Toba society. As cultural heritage, however, the value of Ulos Ragi Pakko has not yet been optimally represented by the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum because the exhibition narrative is limited and educational programs remain general. As

a result, the museum's current role is stronger in physical conservation than in the communication of cultural values.

This study demonstrates that museums function not only as institutions for storing collections but also as spaces of cultural interpretation that transmit the meanings of cultural heritage to society. Therefore, the museum needs to strengthen the interpretation of its collections and involve communities in educational programs so that it can function more effectively as an agent of preservation and as a means of increasing appreciation of Ulos Ragi Pakko. The findings contribute to cultural history and museological studies by showing that the analysis of museum artifacts can be used to understand the relationship between cultural objects, social identity, and the continuity of Batak Toba traditions.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest. If a conflict exists, it must be disclosed clearly.

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