

# Contextualization of selected traditional musical instruments during cultural and religious practices: a study of bapedi tradition

## Abstract

Bapedi musical instruments are used in both vocal and instrumental dance ensembles, in festivals, religious rituals or funeral processions, as often as in musical entertainment. There are various rites that exist in traditional Bapedi society. Some are related to the life cycles of human beings and are called rites of passage. Others are performed during times of affliction like sickness or drought. Still others are seasonal and are associated with the planting or harvesting of crops. These rites aim at maintaining the harmony of the cosmic power. The present study investigated the use of three Bapedi traditional musical instruments in religious and cultural practices. The instruments are meropa (drums), dinaka (whistles and reed pipes) and phalafala (sable antelope horn). The primary source for data collection was oral interviews. Secondary sources include publications, and records. Other methods included photographing different instruments, videos of performances and semi-structured interviews with nine (9) Bapedi musicians. The purpose of this contribution is to show that Bapedi cultural and religious practices need not to be seen as superstitious, magic, pagan or as evil. The results demonstrated that the three traditional musical instruments investigated have different influences in social, religious, and cultural activities in Bapedi society. Although it was concluded that all three play a role, drums play the most important part in both cultural and religious practices. The primary question for this study is: what are the cultural and religious functions of meropa (drums), dinaka (whistles and reed pipes) and phalafala (sable antelope horn) during cultural and religious practices of Bapedi?

**Keywords:** bapedi, religious practices, traditional instruments, music

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## Introduction

Still relatively little is known about the relationship between Bapedi cultural and religious practices, and their traditional musical instruments. The principal language of indigenous Bapedi music is Sepedi. In Bapedi culture, music plays an important role. It is an important part of all aspects of life, including various activities such as social, religious, recreational and cultural occasions. Many people spend a considerable amount of time daily listening to music, singing or playing musical instruments. Ensemble musicians' understanding of the ways in which physical gestures are used when interacting with fellow musicians helps to increase musical communication abilities in all music genres found in Bapedi society. The quality of public performances is enhanced by a deeper understanding of the ways in which traditional Bapedi music practitioners communicate with the audience.

For the purpose of this study, however, it is necessary to state a few experiences as evidence of field research. Traditional Bapedi music is essentially indigenous music developed and maintained by oral tradition by each tribe or clan within Bapedi society, and organized and practiced as an integral part of everyday life. While the Pedi music tradition recognizes the importance of vocal/choral music, it also provides the development of instrumental resources. A variety of traditional musical instruments are found in Bapedi society. They can be scientifically classed into two groups, according to the means used to produce the sound. They include membranophones (drums) with a stretched membrane (Figure 1) and aero phones (flutes, pipes, whistles and horns) in which vibrating air produces the sound. Instruments of both classes are widely used in cultural and religious practices.

Instruments are often played in groups or ensembles. Aero phones and membrano-phones are the most common instruments found in Bapedi society. Drums or membranophones are found in a variety of sizes and shapes (Figure 1). They may be played by both hands (and sticks) technique. For the purpose of this study meropa (drums), dinaka (whistles and reed pipes) and phalafala (sable antelope horn) have been selected.



**Figure 1** Drums with a stretched membrane.

In almost all the clans in Bapedi society, a variety of music genres are found which are distinguished from one another in a number of

ways, for example, the centers of motion, traditional costumes or 'traditional' outfit, type of instruments or instrumental combinations used. These music genres are contextually classified and performed in terms of either religious or cultural rituals. The allocation and classification of music genres for use on specific rituals generally suggest that each music genre is more appropriate and relevant for use in the specific context than others, on account of its religious and cultural significance. For example, the music genre of circumcision or initiation school would be irrelevant for ancestor veneration.

## Previous related research

In Bapedi culture, like in many cultures in Africa, traditional musical instruments have many functions and significances besides that of making music. This observation is supported by McGaffey<sup>1</sup> who reports that: "Kongo musical instruments have many functions and significances besides that of making music. Music itself was and is thought to enable communication with the dead, often inducing spirit possession, "causing the spirit to descend". The presence of the spirit is recognized when everybody is carried away, having a good time. Parties and ritual events, which are often much the same thing, are enlivened by music, dancing, alcohol, ululation, and explosions of gun powder".<sup>1</sup> In approximation to the present study, Chernoff<sup>2</sup> writes that African music is an art form that results from a spontaneous and emotional creation [of African origin] that is an uninhibited dynamic expression of vitality. Amoaku<sup>3</sup> re-deriving from Mbiti<sup>4</sup> discusses African music as principally a collective art and communal property, whose spiritual qualities are shared and experienced by all, as well as it is that aspect of tradition which provides the repertoires of its belief, ideas, wisdom and feelings in musical forms. Söderberg<sup>5</sup> remarks that there is a close link between musical instruments and art, including painting, sculpture, and pyrography. On a similar note, Blacking<sup>6</sup> believes that music making is an expressly human activity. In his opinion, it should bind all humans together, bearing in mind the factors that make cultural and musical inter-mingling more common at the turn of the new century. Scholars such as Merriam,<sup>7</sup> Nannyonga<sup>8</sup> & Ekweme<sup>9</sup> have argued that "music does not exist in isolation from the people who produce it". They further mention that "to understand music of a given people, the basic knowledge of the cultural factors behind the production of sound structure is important". Similar sentiments are expressed by Dargie<sup>10</sup> on the music of the Xhosa: "There is no word for music, but there are many categories of songs and dances, which are living expressions of music. In Xhosa music, instruments have a quasi-human role...the instrument is not playing an abstract melody but is in fact performing a version of the living text".<sup>11</sup>

Attesting to the opinion above, Chernoff<sup>2</sup> shares his research experiences in Ghana and argues that "music helps to objectify the philosophical, religious and moral systems of the society". With regard to the ritualistic use of music in Bapedi culture, James,<sup>12</sup> discussing the oral performance of secular or ritual texts argues that "music defined by Bapedi, is embedded within a broader socio-cultural history that mandates the settings in which it is performed today". Ethnomusicologist<sup>7</sup> Gbeho<sup>13</sup> cautions that "may I make it clear that when I talk about music, I am referring to drumming, dancing and singing. They are all one thing and must not be separated".<sup>11</sup> Others such as Nelson,<sup>14</sup> Scott<sup>15</sup> & Triebel<sup>16</sup> for example, provide convincing evidence of a relationship between music and culture. They examine the role of 'ethnomusicological' research in musicology, herein stressing the importance of the bonds between music and culture.

They argue that, "accepting that music is part of the experience of every human culture group we can say that it is an inherent gift given by a wise Creator for the benefit and enjoyment for us all". Scholars such as Fabella,<sup>7</sup> Mans<sup>18</sup> & Nzewi<sup>19</sup> have pursued a research about traditional healing in South Africa and/or Africa. Fabella<sup>7</sup> for example, maintains that in Africa emphasis is given to cultural values such as relationship with ancestors, rites of passage and traditional healing services. In his view, music plays a prominent role in the daily lives of the African people, especially in religious, cultural and social rituals.

## Aims

It has become evident from a thorough review of the literature that there is little known about the use of traditional musical instruments during Bapedi cultural and religious practices. The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of three traditional Bapedi musical instruments during cultural and religious practices, thereby contribute to the growing knowledge of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, African Musical Arts, African religion and spirituality in South Africa, Africa and entire world. The instruments are meropa (drums), dinaka (whistles and reed pipes) and phalafala (sable antelope horn).

## Research methodology

This study utilized anthropological research methods of in-depth ethnographic<sup>1</sup> social scientific inquiry to address the key research questions, whilst maintaining sociological concern with obtaining data relevant and related to the sociological and cultural theories in use. A triangulated approach was taken to the collection of data, which consists of:

- (i) Ethnographic observational data,
- (ii) Interview data, and
- (iii) Literature searches.

Firstly, ethnographic observational data was obtained from five (5) villages. Secondly, interview data, was obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with at least eight (8) traditional Bapedi musicians across the five (5) villages, who were currently performing indigenous Bapedi music with conversations focused on addressing the study's/project's key research questions. Both oral interviews and observations were employed to gather data. Most of these interviews were informal and spontaneous. However, I also carried out other interviews that were longer, more formal, and in some instances taped. Virtually, all the interviewing, formal and informal, revolved around questions emerging from my observations. Thirdly, I visited the Libraries of the University of South Africa (UNISA), and University of Pretoria, Pretoria, in South Africa to review existing literature around the topic from books, journals, newspapers, magazines, reports and theses, while analysis and discussion of results were in progress. The visits to Sekhukhune district that I have made during the past ten (10) months (April 2017 – date), the one that took place from 10-14 August 2017 has been the most memorable. The reason for this is that on three occasions, I had the opportunity to spend the entire afternoon with the subjects of this study (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Martin and Nakayama<sup>23</sup> define ethnography as "a discipline that examines the patterned interactions and significant symbols of specific cultural groups to identify the cultural norms that guide their behaviours".

<sup>2</sup>I would like to express my sincere thanks to these subjects for their kindness and their time spent in sharing with me the information about the relationship between Bapedi religious and cultural practices and their traditional musical instruments.





**Figure 2** Names of subjects from left to right. (1) Tšhupša Matšomane. (2) Mashianoke Senatadi Phogole. (3) Sophia Masalesa. (4) Hlupi Nkwana Makgoga. (5) Mmashele Molangwana and others.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the second visit, I was convinced that the interviews (narratives) and observations needed to be published. Through these interviews, I was able to gather a considerable amount of information about the relationship between Bapedi religious and cultural practices and their traditional musical instruments that have never been documented.

## Research findings

### The context of performances

**Cultural and religious functions of the drums:** The drum (moropa) is the instrument without which no Bapedi social or religious ritual is complete.<sup>20</sup> Huskisson<sup>20</sup> mentions that there was no sound that she appreciated more than listening to the steady throb of meropa (drums), accompanying the rising and falling of voices, some near, some far from the kraals spread throughout the length and breadth of some vast Sekhukhune land valleys. Bapedi drum (moropa) is reported to have played very important roles in the lives of Bapedi in communication and celebration. Kirby<sup>21</sup> concurs with Huskisson<sup>20</sup> by commenting that “the drum of Bapedi known as moropa has certain ceremonies connected with its construction as well as taboos, relating to its use which was communicated to him by Barnard of Sekhukhune land”. One example of such a taboo is that drumming is strictly prohibited for the duration of six months if the chief or any member of the royal family passes-on. Drumming is also prohibited for three months when the initiation school for both boys and girls is in process. The above observation is confirmed by Löytty,<sup>22</sup> when he writes that “in many African cultures the use of instruments is practice-specific”. According to Löytty<sup>22</sup> their playing is regulated according to the particular cultural tradition and context in where they appear. Löytty<sup>22</sup> further states that this can involve meanings, taboos and unwritten rules determining the performance of an instrument.

Among Bapedi, music making on ceremonial and ritual occasions may be integrated with the event characterized by symbolic actions which are dramatic in character. In the context of music making, music practitioners participate in communion to mourn or to celebrate. From the observations and interviews, it was established

<sup>3</sup>Madikedike Simon Sete; Manare Anna Lekwana; Tswaledi Stephen Mashegoane and Matshetla Sarah Mmotla

that in Bapedi culture when the chief dies, some stages in the funeral are marked by music designed to perform various dramatic functions. For example, the funeral announcements include drumming, for the drums associated with the office of a chief can convey this message in a more forceful and dramatic manner to the community. According to Matshetla Sarah Mmotla (personal communication, 12 August 2017), while the corpse of the dead chief is being carried into the grave, the drum is beaten and all those who hear the sound of the drum understand. The word spreads, *mabu a utswitšwe*, meaning the chief has passed-on. The drum has burst, that is, the chief has passed-on. Matshetla further mentions that for the installation of the new chief who succeeds a dead *kgoshi* (chief), a different kind of music is performed, and different stages of the ceremony are again marked by music.

During my personal interview with Manare Anna Lekwana on the 11<sup>th</sup> of August 2017 at Dingwane village, Sekhukhune district, she pointed out that “in the Pedi society, Bapedi music practitioners believe that the only instruments which are effective in conveying messages to the community or audience are drums (meropa) and sable antelope horns (phalafala)”. In her view, not everyone is able to interpret the messages they convey. She observes that drums and sable antelope horns are played in dialogue with oral performers who understand their language and challenge them to at times go on praising. In consonance with the above view, Nketia<sup>24</sup> writes that “in many Ghanaian societies, African practice of exploiting the sounds of musical instruments for the purpose of giving signals or for conveying messages is found”. Ethnographic data from the field informs us that although a wide variety of drums exists in Bapedi society, each clan and/or traditional dance group usually specializes in a small number of drum types (Figure 3). This observation is vividly corroborated by Nketia<sup>25</sup> who states that “mixed ensembles of drums may be composed of a set of varying sonorities that may include a high-pitched drum, a medium-pitched drum, a tenor-pitched drum, and a low-pitched drum”. He observes that, it is the lowest sounding drum that dominates the others as the principal instrument.



**Figure 3** Small number of drum types found in Bapedi society.

It is also noticeable that in Bapedi religious rituals, such as *malopo* ritual, drumming in conjunction with leg rattles, horns, hand-clapping, whistles and ululation, form the accompaniment for the singing and dancing of both traditional healers and their trainees. The above view

is in consonant with Kubik's<sup>26</sup> observation on music and movement. In his view, "all music in Africa is almost naturally associated with movement and action, such as playing percussion instruments, ululating and hand clapping and dancing". These observations are supported by Lebaka<sup>27</sup> who observes that Bapedi traditional healers perform malopo songs with drumming accompaniment to communicate with ancestors and at times to summon the ancestors when problems seem particularly difficult to surmount: to urge the spirits to leave or enter the body as well as to reinforce or strengthen both the traditional healers and their trainees and relate them more closely to their ancestors. All these instruments are contextual to the type of a ritual they accompany, namely, ancestor veneration.

Drums are frequently seen in indigenous Bapedi music.<sup>27</sup> They are also used for communication purposes. The impression created during interviews and observations was that drums are the most common instruments employed in Bapedi culture to accompany traditional Bapedi songs. This is in line with the finding of Nketia<sup>24</sup> who confirms that: "In spite of the popularity of the drum as a musical instrument, it is more of a 'social' instrument than a domestic one, and single drums are rarely played for purely musical purpose in organized social life without the addition of other instruments or voices". Comments by Nketia are noteworthy because during a personal interview with Madikedike Simon Sete (28<sup>th</sup> of July 2017) at Dingwane village, Sekhukhune district, he pointed out that: "According to Bapedi music tradition, the qualification for leadership/soloist rests on three factors: First, the leader should be creative; second, it is expected that he/she should have a sweet voice, since he/she has to sing, however, this is not as important as the first qualification; finally, the soloist should have a subtle wrist. That is, he/she must have executant ability and the skill to produce the right kinds of tones and dynamics on the drum. When the performer has all three qualities, he is highly respected".<sup>11</sup> According to Simon, traditionally, each performance begins with the lead drum establishing the dance pattern as a way to regulate the tempo and rhythm of the dance.<sup>11</sup> The above observation is in line with the opinion of Mashianoke Senatadi Phogole (personal communication, 13 August 2017) who states that "the drum (moropa) is the most commonly used of all traditional musical instruments found in Bapedi society". In her view, the drum plays a significant role in Bapedi society and culture and is regarded as having more ritual importance than other instruments.

### Cultural and religious functions of dinaka (whistles & reed-pipes)

**Whistles:** Mönning observes that Bapedi traditional healers use various magical whistles or flutes. He explains that the most important one is a whistle fashioned from the quills of a porcupine (Bapedi totem) and other whistles are made from wood or bone and covered with copper wire or snake-skin. According to him, this whistle is used to ward off hail, lightning and storms, but a flute can also be blown against a powerful enemy warrior. The observations of Mönning bring to the fore the use of traditional whistle (mokudetane) in Bapedi culture. For example, during the study, it was observed that mokudetane (Figure 4) is played for amusement only, while Bapedi boys are herding goats and cows, but not for calling either the goats or cows. From the interviews, it was also established that sometimes, mekudetane are blown at village merry-makings and on occasions of general rejoicing. My investigations have led me to conclude that although used singly, they are sometimes played antiphonally, especially in the curious mimic warfare in which the boys indulge prior to circumcision, as well as proving their fitness for man's estate.



Figure 4 Traditional Bapedi whistle (*mokudetane*).

During my field investigation at Kotsiri village in Sekhukhune district, it was interesting to observe that during Bapedi reed pipes' music ensemble performance, whistles and other traditional musical instruments may be included. As musical instruments, they are fundamentally employed for performance – composition of melodies as well as simulation of texts in music and dance performance situations. They provide lyrical melodies that contribute immensely to the overall timbre and aesthetics of Bapedi music. In some musical performances too, it was observed that whistles are effectively employed for non-verbal communication with ensemble members as well as with audience. This could be in the form of cues, musical signals or mere urging of dancers and players for more creative performance. In some instances too, whistles are employed as master instruments that conduct and determine an event. This is found in some ceremonial performances such as kiba, makgakgasa, dipepetwane and lebowa. The above views are supported by Mmashele Molangwana (personal communication, 12 August 2017), who states that "in Bapedi culture, whistle playing is largely dependent on improvisation, variation and gestures to make the rendition impressive".

**Reed-pipes:** Bapedi reed-pipes' music,<sup>4</sup> as a form of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, has been the repository of Bapedi's beliefs and practices. In my fieldwork in Sekhukhune district, Limpopo Province, it was interesting and encouraging to observe that through Bapedi reed pipes' music, that allocates songs and dances to each age group in the community, young people have been socialized.<sup>11</sup> using videos, it was recorded that Bapedi reed pipes' music (kiba) reflects the values of Bapedi society. This observation is supported by Tshupša Matšomane (personal communication, 12 August 2017) who explains that Bapedi reed-pipes' music mirrors the culture and values of Bapedi who perform it. She observes that Bapedi use reed pipes' music to subdue their environment and turn it to a pleasant world. These observations support Lebaka's<sup>11</sup> assertion of the relationship between music and culture. He states that "some songs performed by Bapedi reed-pipes' music ensemble address issues of societal concern and ethical values". According to him, even when the song appears to be for entertainment (as opposed to ritual), a lesson or two will be found tucked in somewhere.

<sup>4</sup>The instruments involved are *tsošane*, *phalolane*, *tatedi*, *sereku*, *serekwane*, *maletelela*, *phalola*, *lempu*, *kgomo*, *gomang* (pipes) and *matikwane*, *phousele* and *sekgokolo* (drums).



An interesting observation on the construction of reed pipes should be mentioned. It appears that the shorter the pipe, the higher the pitch/ tone, and the longer the pipe, the lower the pitch/tone. Informal interviews indicated that originally the reed pipes were carved from the actual 'reeds', mainly found in the river. According to Tswaledi Stephen Mashegoane (personal communication, 12 August 2017), "that's where the name originated". Tswaledi adds further insight to the understanding of Bapedi reed pipes. He points out that: "taking into consideration the increasing number of reed pipes' music ensembles in Sekhukhune district and across Limpopo Province, it seems as if the actual 'reeds' are gradually proving unavailable due to high demand, and as such players of different reed pipes' music ensembles from different cardinal points within Bapedi society substitute the actual 'reed pipes' with durable aluminium tubes which are inexpensive and widely available" (Figure 5).



Figure 5 Bapedi reed pipes.



Figure 6 Sable antelope horn (phalafala).

Tswaledi further mentions that "these aluminium tubes produce a tone that is gentler still and similar to original reed pipes".

### Cultural and religious functions of phalafala (sable antelope horn)

Bapedi traditional healers possess a number of pipes which they blow during malopo ritual, either to lend a dramatic touch to proceedings and to create a spine-chilling atmosphere with shrill blasts, or whose powers of persuasion they wish added to their

magical incantations and entreaties. These usually consist of small natural horns (e.g. phalafala), slung round the neck. In Bapedi society, horns such as phalafala (Figure 5) are constructed to be a vital and continuously contemporary means of expression and communication. Phalafala (sable antelope horn) is normally used to announce messages in Bapedi community. It is the instrument that has more freedom to develop its motive extensively without any limitations. Kirby<sup>21</sup> supports the above observations by mentioning that among Bapedi the sable antelope horn is called phalafala, as in Bavenda land. Further, Kirby elaborates that phalafala is used in religious ceremonies for conveying signals and verbal messages, as well as for playing music.

Nkwana Hlupi Makgoga (personal communication, 13 August 2017), endorses these observations and asserts that "the sable antelope horn (phalafala) is used as a carriage that embodies relevant messages to Bapedi community". In her view, phalafala remains an effective Bapedi traditional musical instrument for the preservation of the musical tradition and heritage of Bapedi.

## Discussion

### The relationship between Bapedi cultural and religious practices and their traditional musical instruments

The impression one gets from the research findings about the use of traditional musical instruments in Bapedi culture is that Bapedi cultural and religious music is based exclusively on songs and dances associated with traditional beliefs and instruments such as drums, whistles, reed pipes, rattles and horns.<sup>11</sup> Results of the study showed that the nature and scope of music making in Bapedi culture is generally related to the aims and purposes of a specific social event or to the needs of the performers. Based on the findings of this study, it will not be presumptuous to state without fear of contradiction that despite fundamental and multi-consequential changes Christianity, modern civilization, British and Dutch colonial activities and the government neglect of indigenous music brought about in Bapedi society, a large percentage of Bapedi refused to forsake their musical tradition and were thus able to preserve some characteristic features of Bapedi, like observing certain rituals and initiation rites, as well as playing their traditional musical instruments. On the question of the relationship between Bapedi cultural and religious practices, and their traditional musical instruments, Sophia Masalesa (personal communication, 11 August 2017) commented, "The use of traditional musical instruments during cultural and religious practices reinforces Bapedi musical tradition and heritage as a way in which to protect, support, perpetuate and preserve Bapedi cultural identity". Her viewpoint is valid in Sepedi context, for Bapedi music exists in performance. It is indigenous oral memory based and realized by means of social manipulation.

It is evident therefore, from these research findings that music appears to be an expression of the most basic values and feelings of Bapedi. These findings suggest that Bapedi society deserves respect for what it has achieved in the past in terms of the preservation of Bapedi cultural heritage, identity and religion. The above evidence leads to the assumption that traditional Bapedi musical instruments indeed play a lot of roles in objectifying and unifying the philosophy and religious tenets of Bapedi. Informal interviews indicated that both cultural and religious practices have music as part of their musical heritage and tradition.

The research findings which have been presented in this study

help us to understand the relevance of indigenous Bapedi music in contemporary Bapedi society. These findings further indicate that in Bapedi culture, music takes place in many contexts and every instrument has a particular role to fulfil. Noteworthy is the fact that Bapedi create music to accompany religious, cultural and social rituals, as well as to reflect on human experiences.<sup>11</sup> We observe in the present study that in Bapedi culture, there is a variety of musical instruments. Some instruments are closely associated with particular functions and occasions that they give their names to these events. The tradition of music extends as far back in time in Africa. Hence Africa has a body of indigenous musical knowledge which embodies the life experiences, interaction and natural settings of the masses of African people and a system for preserving and renewing it. The study has revealed that believing in the concept of African religion and spirituality, the essential values of Bapedi culture are embedded in the Bapedi culture's music, its content, religion, processes and roles. We find in these findings evidence of the belief system and practices of Bapedi. Reviewing the results yielded thus far, it is clear that indigenous Bapedi music and the use of traditional musical instruments have not been lost and still exist, however, South Africa is changing rapidly. Generally, in Bapedi culture as is also evident in several other African cultures, the drums are considered sacred.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate the value of selected traditional musical instruments in Bapedi community and their usefulness as a medium of enlightenment and communication. The study has revealed that music is an integral part of Bapedi culture and heritage. It is a window through which the outside world can glimpse the riches of Bapedi tradition and cultural heritage. On the basis of research findings and discussions, it is arguable that within Bapedi traditional music making, every instrument has a particular role to play. Indications from the investigation suggest that traditional Bapedi musical instruments cannot be separated totally from the cultural and religious practices of Bapedi. It is recommended that a research study of this kind should be taken seriously in South Africa for an exploration of indigenous values influencing Indigenous Knowledge Systems, African Musical Arts, African religion and spirituality. It is concluded that although the selected traditional musical instruments play a role, drums are the most frequently used musical instruments in both cultural and religious practices. Finally, it is hoped that Bapedi music practitioners will keep and perpetuate their valuable heritage, which is still needed for survival and for the welfare of the next generation.

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## Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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