



Stripping the *mangongkal holi* and confirming the Holy Spirit

**Authors:**

Rogate A.T. Gultom¹ 
Rencan C. Marbun¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Faculty of Theology,
Institut Agama Kristen Negri
Tarutung, Tarutung,
Indonesia

Corresponding author:

Rogate Gultom,
gultomrogate01@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 05 July 2024
Accepted: 18 Oct. 2024
Published: 28. Nov. 2024

How to cite this article:

Gultom, R.A.T. & Marbun,
R.C., 2024, 'Stripping the
mangongkal holi and
confirming the Holy Spirit',
*HTS Teologiese Studies/
Theological Studies* 80(1),
a10020. [https://doi.
org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.10020](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.10020)

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The *mangongkal holi* tradition in Batak is a heritage from ancestors that has been the subject of prolonged theological debate. As a local phenomenon, the tradition needs to be explored with an appropriate approach to interpret it accurately. This study asserts that the 'kernel' and 'husk' approach has the potential to contribute constructively to the relationship between the church and culture in Batak, particularly regarding the *mangongkal holi* tradition. The research employs a qualitative-descriptive analysis approach, using books, journal articles and other references as the basis for argumentation. In conclusion, there is alignment between the expectations of culture and the church regarding *mangongkal holi*. The pursued values such as gratitude, honouring parents and others are elements that are consistent in both cultural appreciation and Christian faith.

Contribution: This article provides insight into contextual theology, where global pneumatology and local culture could be paired in the sense that the Holy Spirit could be understood by the community within their local tradition without degrading the values of church doctrine. Rather, it enriches the culture and confirms church identity.

Keywords: *mangongkal holi*; Holy Spirit; Batak; culture; Batak; Indonesia.

Introduction

Kosuke Koyama, a Japanese theologian with extensive service in Thailand, asserts that the cosmological complexity of Nusantara society regarding ancestral spirits is a primary contributor to theological struggles for missionaries and churches (Koyama 1987:4). The Western world views rituals associated with ancestor worship as linked to animistic beliefs or beliefs in ancestral spirits as guardians or spiritual leaders of families or communities. Conversely, for some, ancestor worship is an integral part of cultural identity and tradition passed down from generation to generation.

During the early encounters in Indonesia, Western missionaries lacked adequate contextual understanding, resulting in an inability to engage in cross-cultural dialogue with local communities. This lack of understanding of the local context may include aspects such as culture, traditions and beliefs of Indonesian society. Missionaries were not fully aware of the complexity of cultural and religious diversity in Indonesia, which could affect their approach to delivering religious teachings. Inability to effectively dialogue with the local community can create a gap between the religious message conveyed by missionaries and the actual understanding and needs of the local population. This poses a barrier to the spread of the Gospel and the establishment of harmonious relationships.

Paul Hiebert attributes the failure of Western missionaries' understanding to the background of literacy traditions from European societies, which comprehend phenomena in a literal sense. Conversely, Indonesian society has a non-literate tradition closely linked to semiotic aspects (Hiebert 1985). Robert Schreiter also agrees with Hiebert. He produced a work that marked the birth of awareness to construct theology from local contexts (Schreiter 2015). The call to prioritise contextual theological studies was echoed by the Catholic Church in the second council in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, the church began to adopt a friendly stance and consider the local context as an object of theology, a theology without ink or a flowery theology.

The emergence of contextual theology has resulted in various local traditions related to ancestral spirits losing their place in society. Specifically, the *mangongkal holi* tradition in Batak has become a subject of theological debate because of the absence of contextual theology in the early 18th and 19th centuries when missionaries from Germany and the Netherlands encountered the Batak community. As a result, some Batak Christians reject the practice of *mangongkal holi*, while others

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support it as part of their local identity. Suh Sung Min (2001:136–138), a South Korean theologian who researched this phenomenon, reports a long struggle among Batak Christian groups over the practice of *mangongkal holi*. In various churches, especially the Huria Kristen Batak Protestant (HKBP), discipline has been imposed on congregation members practicing this ancestral tradition, yet 62% of Batak Christians still observe *mangongkal holi*, even discreetly. Efforts to provide new meaning to *mangongkal holi* have also been made but have not reached a comprehensive point of reconciliation.

Currently, efforts have been made to reaffirm the *mangongkal holi* tradition. Some researchers offer it as an alternative solution to the cemetery land crisis (Silalahi et al. 2020). Additionally, there are other more friendly approaches to *mangongkal holi*. For example, Lumban and Vioreza (2024) discuss it from a sociological perspective, reframing *mangongkal holi* not as a religion or a rival practice to the church. Winanda and Dora (2024) delve into it from an anthropological perspective. Furthermore, Rumbay, Hutasoit and Yulianto (2021) address it from the standpoint of Christian religious education. However, there is a need for a contextual theological approach that can properly place the *mangongkal holi* tradition both in society and, especially, in the church. One popular alternative in contextual theological studies is the kernel and husk theory pioneered by Vincent Donovan and Stephen Bevans.

Although various approaches have been addressed to the *mangongkal holi* tradition, theological struggles have yet to comprehensively accommodate the debate among Batak Christian groups who see the tradition in relation to ancestor worship and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as two distinct elements. Therefore, the kernel and husk approach could serve as an alternative for peace amid theological differences. Hence, the research question to be explored in this article is: What can be learned from the contextual theology idea of kernel and husk that can contribute to theological struggles regarding the *mangongkal holi* tradition in the land of Batak?

The research method employed in this study is a qualitative-descriptive analysis, aimed at exploring the *mangongkal holi* tradition within the Batak culture. The approach involves an in-depth examination of existing literature, including books, journal articles and other relevant references, to construct a comprehensive argument. The study specifically utilises the 'kernel' and 'husk' approach to distinguish between the core values and external practices of the tradition. By doing so, the research seeks to provide a nuanced interpretation of how the tradition aligns with Christian teachings, emphasising shared values such as gratitude and the honouring of parents. This method allows for a thorough exploration of the intersection between cultural practices and theological perspectives, contributing to the broader discourse on the relationship between church and culture in the Batak community.

Discussion

Husk and Kernel: A cross-cultural contextual theory

The Husk and Kernel theory, developed by Vincent Donovan and Stephen Bevans, serves as the foundation for a contextual theological approach that integrates the Christian faith with local culture. By delineating these elements in the context of Christian mission, missionaries further explore how this approach can open doors for deeper understanding and dialogue between Christian teachings and local culture, particularly the *mangongkal holi* tradition.

In Stephen Bevans' book (1985:40), 'Models of Contextual Theology', translated into Indonesian, the terms husk and kernel are translated as 'bernas' and 'sekam', which are synonymous with rice. Meanwhile, Vincent Donovan (2019), a Catholic priest, introduced the concept of husk and kernel in the context of mission in Africa in the 1970s. He realised that Christian missions often introduce faith in a format that may intersect or conflict with local culture. Considering the potential for meaning deviation because of language differentiation, this article maintains the terms husk and kernel to preserve the originality of the main idea of this concept.

The husk and kernel theory highlights the differences between the 'Husk' or outer shell and the 'Kernel' or deeper core within a culture or religion. 'Husk' refers to external elements that can be changeable, such as rituals, symbols or local traditions, while 'Kernel' characterises fundamental values and truths that can be accommodated by Christian teachings. In the context of Christian missions, the use of the husk and kernel theory means that missionaries are invited to understand and respect local expressions of faith and religious practices while remaining faithful to the essence of the Christian faith. This involves a more open and inclusive approach to local culture without sacrificing the core principles of Christian teachings.

The application of this theory involves three crucial steps. Firstly, missionaries must strive to understand and respect local expressions of faith and religious practices. This may include participating in local rituals, understanding local symbolism and listening to spiritual stories from the community. Secondly, missionaries need to identify 'Kernel' elements or fundamental values that align with Christian teachings within the local culture. These are aspects that can be accommodated and accepted by the Christian faith without compromising core principles. Thirdly, integrate these 'Kernel' values into the context of the local community. This can be done through various means, such as aligning the gospel message with local values, adopting local language in religious communication or aligning local rituals with Christian religious celebrations.

One concrete example of applying this theory is in the Batak culture in Indonesia, particularly in the *mangongkal holi* tradition. In this ceremony, the Husk and Kernel approach

can help missionaries understand and respect local practices without sacrificing the essence of the Christian faith. In the *mangongkal holi* tradition, the 'Husk' can be seen in aspects such as the ritual of digging and relocating bones, as well as in the celebrations and feasts following this process. Missionaries can observe the 'Kernel' values in this context, such as respect for ancestors and the continuity of family traditions. By applying the husk and kernel theory, missionaries can guide the *mangongkal holi* process while maintaining essential Christian values and, at the same time, respecting local culture. This creates a pathway for more open dialogue and the formation of a more inclusive church.

While the Husk and Kernel theory brings significant benefits, it also faces several challenges. The main challenge is finding the right balance between respecting local culture and maintaining the integrity of the Christian faith. This requires carefulness and deep understanding of the local context. In certain situations, it may even be perceived as a syncretic product (Kasedu 2023; Talan 2020). However, the implementation of this theory can create churches that are more relevant and connected to the local community. In addition, it opens doors for inclusivity and diversity within the church context.

***Mangongkal holi*: Tracing ancestral traditions in Batak Land**

In the context of the Indonesian language, *mangongkal holi* refers to the practice of exhuming and relocating the remains of deceased individuals with the intention of reburial at a new location, accompanied by customary ceremonies and celebrations (Hutapea 2015). This definition highlights the activity of excavating the remains of deceased individuals from several years prior, with the aim of transferring them to a new burial site considered more suitable, which is then commemorated with customary ceremonies and celebrations. *mangongkal holi*, a tradition originating from the Batak Toba tribe, is still practiced today and closely related to ancestral heritage.

The ancestors of the Batak Toba tribe always emphasised to their descendants the importance of owning land and residing in their ancestral land, known as Bona Pasogit. When parents or ancestors pass away, whether in their homeland or elsewhere, their bodies or remains are expected to be brought back to their homeland, becoming part of Bona Pasogit. Therefore, each lineage descendant has a large and magnificent grave in their homeland, symbolising respect and the social status of their lineage (Supsiloani & Sinaga 2016). Before conducting the *mangongkal holi* ceremony, the family first discusses with various parties involved, including clan elders, traditional leaders, local government and others. The preparation and conduct of this traditional ceremony must be well-organised and orderly, ensuring task allocation and smooth event processes.

To maintain harmony with the Christian faith, the *mangongkal holi* ceremony begins with a worship service. The church

reminds attendees that excavating the remains is solely an act of respect for parents or ancestors, without any connection to seeking blessings from the departed spirits. There is no assumption that the spirits of the deceased are still present in the bones (Purba 2014). During the animistic and dynamistic eras, the tradition of retrieving the bones involved a series of rituals such as cleansing, rearranging the bones on white cloth, offering cigarettes, betel leaves, drinking tuak (local alcoholic beverage) and washing hands. In the blessing request, represented by a spokesperson, they seek blessings or pots as expressions of sorrow before the bones of their ancestors.

Currently, most of the Batak community has converted to Protestant Christianity, although initially they practiced animism and dynamism. *mangongkal holi*, as a ceremony rooted in Protestant Christianity, is not organised within the church's scope but is only attended by families belonging to one lineage. The impact of *mangongkal holi* can be seen in the existence of the Marga Monument, which serves as a marker of the lineage's origin in a location. The Batak Toba culture continues to evolve over the years.

The *mangongkal holi* ceremony is considered a complex ritual, taking into account aspects such as labour, time, funds and social interactions with the parties involved (Sari et al. 2022). Over time, there have been changes in the implementation of this ceremony according to the accounts of elders. Before Protestant Christianity was accepted in the Batak Land, ancestral bones were moved from old stone graves to new stone graves, called 'batu na pir' (stone monument). However, this evolution changed the way in which bone burials were conducted, with bones now being buried in large new graves, called 'tambak' or monuments (Malau 2000).

The celebration of *mangongkal holi* includes feasting, communal meals and lively performances of Batak gondang and tortor dances (Kosasih 2015; Nainggolan & Yoserizal 2017). Communal meals involve dishes of pork and buffalo meat. Although the Protestant Christian Church rejects the use of Batak gondang and tortor dances because of perceived syncretism, this tradition remains alive in the celebration of *mangongkal holi*. Gondang and tortor dances continue to be associated with various Batak traditional ceremonies, including *mangongkal holi* (Purba 2014). Despite requiring significant costs and taking a long time to prepare, *mangongkal holi* is considered an important celebration that unites the Batak Toba community and their descendants.

In the perspective of Batak customs, *mangongkal holi*, along with Marhorja, is considered the highest event in the Margondang and Manortor ceremonies (Hutagaol & Prayitno 2020; Sari et al. 2022). This ceremony can be interpreted as a significant event for the Batak people. Gondang hasuhuton accompanies Margondang Pahehe Saring-Saring, indicating that seven Batak gondang are present in the event. The family drum sets the feast or celebration, while the parhata king or spokesperson offers prayers to understand the feelings, requests and desires of hasuhuton, considered as ancestral

spirits. These prayers are crafted with beautiful grammar and are rich with proverbs. The ceremony begins with hula-hula drumming, where uncles or elders give blessings. At this point, interactions occur through questioning, discussion and exchanging proverbs. In prayers to God, women gently stroke the chins of the hula-hula, symbolising affection. The hula-hula brings ulos or mangulosi and eme na pir, while both parties ask each other for 'musik gendang' or gondang pasu-pasu. Companions, such as dongan sabutuha and boru-bere, provide refreshments, snacks, lapet (traditional Batak snack made from glutinous rice), fruits and others during Margondang and Manortor. The Dalihan Natolu kinship system seems to be applied, consisting of Manat Mardongan Tubu, Dame Mardongan Sahuta, Elek Marboru and Somba Marhula-hula (Dinda et al. 2023; Hutabarat, Ermanto & Juita 2013).

Unraveling the essence of tradition

Silalahi et al. (2019) conducted an in-depth exploration of *mangongkal holi* and discovered the essence of this tradition. They argued that the *mangongkal holi* tradition of the Batak community contains various deep-rooted local wisdom within their culture. Through comprehensive analysis, they identified nine main core elements of the *mangongkal holi* tradition. Firstly, gratitude is a fundamental local wisdom ingrained in the tradition of the Batak Toba community. This involves expressions of gratitude to the almighty, ancestors (Hula-hula) and friends for the blessings received in various life events. The practice of gratitude is not limited to moments of happiness but also encompasses times of sorrow, reflecting a deep belief in the divine source of life and the importance of gratitude in all circumstances.

Secondly, respect is a core value ingrained in the *mangongkal holi* tradition, emphasising respect for ancestors, parents and cultural heritage. The act of excavating and honouring ancestral bones signifies deep respect for lineage and the contributions of previous generations to the community. Thirdly, humility is a virtue valued in the Batak Toba community, reflected in their approach to traditions such as *mangongkal holi*. The humility exhibited in ritual practices highlights the importance of simplicity, sincerity and a sense of interconnectedness with the community and the divine. Fourthly, the concept of blessings is highly central in the *mangongkal holi* tradition, symbolising acknowledgment of divine grace and abundance of blessings bestowed upon the community. By engaging in the ritual of excavating and re-burying ancestral bones, participants seek to petition and honour blessings for themselves and future generations. Fifthly, the *mangongkal holi* tradition instills a sense of responsibility among members of the Batak Toba community towards ancestors, family and cultural heritage. By actively participating in rituals and upholding associated customs, individuals demonstrate their commitment to preserving and passing on traditions to future generations.

Sixthly, collaborative teamwork is a key aspect of the *mangongkal holi* tradition, emphasising the collective effort

required to successfully carry out the ritual. Collaboration among community members, leaders and participants highlights the importance of unity, teamwork and solidarity in preserving cultural practices. Seventhly, prayer plays a significant role in the *mangongkal holi* tradition, serving as a means of communication with the divine and a channel for conveying hopes, gratitude and aspirations. The act of offering prayers during the ritual strengthens the community's spiritual connection with higher powers and emphasises the importance of faith and devotion. Eighthly, the *mangongkal holi* tradition fosters agreement in dialogue, encouraging open communication, understanding and reconciliation among community members. Through respectful dialogue and negotiation, individuals navigate differences, resolve conflicts and maintain harmony within the community. And lastly, prestige associated with cultural values embedded in the *mangongkal holi* tradition signifies honour, respect and recognition given to individuals actively participating in and upholding customs associated with the ritual. By engaging in the tradition with respect and dedication, participants enhance their social standing and contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage.

The nine local wisdoms found in the *mangongkal holi* tradition of the Batak community reflect a deep connection to their cultural roots, values and beliefs. The values of gratitude, respect, humility, blessings, responsibility, collaborative teamwork, prayer, consensus in dialogue and prestige serve as guiding principles shaping the community's identity, relationships and interactions. By understanding and embracing these local wisdoms, individuals can enrich their lives, strengthen their communities and preserve cultural heritage for future generations.

Affirming the essence of Christian faith

In church tradition, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Christian faith portrays His divinity as the third person of the Triune God, distinct and separate from ancestral spirits who hold no power whatsoever. The Holy Spirit is recognised as a divine person present in the lives of Christians to provide guidance, strength and comfort. As part of the Triune God, the Holy Spirit is regarded as equally divine, powerful and eternal as the Father and the Son. The divinity of the Holy Spirit is reflected in His work of creation, sanctification and guidance of the people of God. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit possesses emotional intelligence, intelligence and divine managerial abilities.

On the contrary, in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is identified as the promised helper by Jesus Christ to His disciples, who will guide them into all truth and empower them to proclaim the Gospel. The Holy Spirit is also regarded as the source of spiritual life for Christians, bestowing spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues, healing and others. The divinity of the Holy Spirit is also reflected in the work of salvation, where the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of individuals to bring repentance, faith and spiritual transformation. In the personal life of every believer,

the Holy Spirit serves as a Helper providing moral guidance, wisdom and strength to resist sin and follow the will of God. Moreover, the divinity of the Holy Spirit is manifested in the fellowship of the church, where the Holy Spirit moves and leads the congregation to serve, build one another and proclaim the love of Christ to the world. With His divine presence, the Holy Spirit unites Christians in faith, hope and love, enabling them to bear witness as the light of the world and the salt of the earth. Awareness of the divinity of the Holy Spirit also teaches Christians to live in obedience and dependence on Him, acknowledging that only through His power can they experience soul transformation and serve effectively in the Kingdom of God. In worship and church ministry, the Holy Spirit is invited to work actively, leading and inspiring every step taken by the people of God. Thus, understanding the divinity of the Holy Spirit leads Christians to a deeper experience of communion with God, strengthening their faith and enabling them to live according to His will.

This is the kernel or main core of the Christian faith regarding the Holy Spirit that cannot be displaced or transformed into other understandings. However, on comparing the core of the Christian faith regarding pneumatology and the tradition of *mangongkal holi*, the spirit is essentially the same. That is why Gerrit Singgih (2000:37) expressed that the values pursued by culture essentially align with those pursued by the experience of Christian faith. The tradition of *mangongkal holi* in Batak society and the experience of Christian faith share the same values in terms of gratitude to God and appreciation of local wisdom. Both traditions contain deep essence in strengthening the relationship between humans and fellow beings and with the Creator.

Firstly, the value of respect for ancestors is the main foundation in the tradition of *mangongkal holi* and Christian teachings. In *mangongkal holi*, the process of digging and honouring the ancestors' bones is carried out as a form of respect and acknowledgment of the services and spiritual heritage left by the ancestors. This practice is not a form of worship but rather a respect and tribute to the ancestors. This aligns with Christian teachings that emphasise the importance of respecting and honouring ancestors, as well as preserving the traditions and values they have passed down. Even the Torah explicitly underscores the importance of honouring parents. By honouring ancestors, both in the tradition of *mangongkal holi* and in the Christian faith, humans can strengthen family ties, preserve cultural identity and inherit noble moral values.

Moreover, gratitude to God is a highly significant value in both traditions. In the tradition of *mangongkal holi*, gratitude is expressed through customary ceremonies involving prayers, songs and offerings to ancestors and God. This reflects an awareness of the blessings and grace received from God and a deep sense of gratitude for all His gifts. Similarly, in the practice of the Christian faith, gratitude to God forms the foundation of true spiritual life. Christians are taught to always be thankful for all the blessings and graces

received and to acknowledge that everything comes from God. Furthermore, in *mangongkal holi*, each stage of the procession and ceremony is carried out according to the customary procedures passed down from generation to generation. This demonstrates the importance of preserving and upholding local wisdom and traditional customs as an integral part of the cultural identity of the Batak community.

Similarly, in the practice of the Christian faith, appreciation for local wisdom is reflected in the integration of religious values with local culture, allowing the Christian faith to be experienced and manifested in the context of everyday life (Rumbay 2021a, 2021b, 2022). Thus, the tradition of *mangongkal holi* and the practice of the Christian faith share the same essence, or kernel, in the values they uphold, such as respect for parents, gratitude to God and appreciation for local wisdom. Both traditions provide a solid foundation for individuals to strengthen their vertical relationship with God and their horizontal relationships with fellow human beings. By upholding these values, the Batak community and Christian believers or Batak-Christian communities can enrich spiritual life, strengthen social bonds and inherit cultural heritage of great value for future generations.

When investigated using the husk and kernel approach, the tradition of *mangongkal holi* in the Batak community appears to be essentially not in conflict with the Christian faith, but rather can be enriched and understood more deeply through the perspective of the Christian faith. Gus Dur, as discussed by Akhmad Nizar (2022:6), argues that humanistic and archipelagic Islam presents Islam that enriches culture, rather than the other way around. The church plays an important role in enriching local culture, including the tradition of *mangongkal holi*, by providing new, deeper and spiritual understanding. Through Christian teachings and values, the church can help its members see the relationship between traditional customs and the Christian faith, so that these traditions are not only understood as cultural heritage but also as part of the spiritual journey of the faithful.

As a spiritual institution, the church has a responsibility to facilitate a proper and profound understanding of the *mangongkal holi* tradition. By integrating Christian values such as respect for ancestors, gratitude to God and love for others, the church can help its members see that the traditional customs are in line with the teachings of the Christian faith. This not only enriches the understanding of the *mangongkal holi* tradition but also strengthens the faith and spiritual relationship of the faithful with God. Furthermore, the church can provide a new perspective in interpreting the meaning and values inherent in the *mangongkal holi* tradition. With the kernel and husk approach, the church can assist its members in recognising the spiritual dimension contained within each stage of the traditional procession. Uncovering this spiritual meaning can help the faithful to feel the presence of God in every ceremony of the tradition, thereby making the *mangongkal holi* tradition not only a cultural celebration but also a profound spiritual experience.

Furthermore, the *mangongkal holi* tradition, deeply rooted in Batak culture, can be integrated with the Christian faith by focusing on the shared values of honouring ancestors, gratitude and respect for family. This integration can occur through a contextual theology that acknowledges the significance of ancestral veneration within *mangongkal holi* while reinterpreting it in light of Christian teachings on honouring parents and remembering the faithful who have departed. By emphasising the spiritual continuity between the living and the deceased, both traditions can coexist without compromising their core values. The Christian faith can embrace this cultural practice by framing it as a means of expressing the Biblical principles of respect, love and familial responsibility, thereby fostering a harmonious relationship between culture and faith.

Conclusion

The *mangongkal holi* tradition does not alter or degrade the Christian faith; rather, it can be enriched and understood more deeply through the perspective of the Christian faith provided by the church. With the husk and kernel theory approach, the church can engage in a more accommodating approach and play a crucial role in enriching local culture and strengthening the relationship between traditional customs and the Christian faith. By employing the kernel and husk approach, the church can assist its members in preserving and celebrating the *mangongkal holi* tradition as an inseparable part of their identity and beliefs as Christians.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Tarutung, Charstar Arstilo Rumbay and Brenda Yeyen Abuno who support the process of writing this article.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

R.A.T.G. was responsible for writing the original draft, methodology and concept, while R.C.M. dealt with data curation, references, validation, software and administration.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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