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EDITORIAL

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Customary nationalism in crisis: protest, identity and politics in eSwatini

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ABSTRACT

The Kingdom of eSwatini is undergoing its worst political and humanitarian crisis in postcolonial times. In June-July 2021, the indiscriminate killing and torturing of pro-democracy protesters by the military and the police force marked the terminal decline of the Swati postcolonial dispensation, centred around the rule of the monarchy in the name of 'custom'. This special issue explores multiple aspects of social and political life under this postcolonial order - from the transition to independence in the 1960s all the way to the current crisis. Inspired by the articles in the collection, we argue that eSwatini's postcolonial biopolitical regime has been driven by an ideology of 'customary nationalism', which constructs Swati citizens as holding a distinct and unitary national identity that is closely aligned with an interpretation of custom that serves the interests of the royal elite. Race and ethnicity, gender and class are key dimensions of biopolitical contestation through which this ideology is articulated in practice. We conclude by framing the contemporary mass movement for democracy as the intensification of biopolitical struggles led by those who have been symbolically and materially marginalised by customary nationalism, including, but not limited to, the youth, the unemployed and the precariously employed.

KEYWORDS

custom; identity; protest; politics; eSwatini

When we originally conceived this special issue, our idea was to time this collection around the 50th anniversary of eSwatini's independence from the British. This would give us an opportunity to appraise and reflect on various social and historical trends that had occurred since then. At that point, the idea of celebration, alongside critical reflection on the postcolonial era, was still in the cards. King Mswati III officially renamed the country – from Swaziland to eSwatini – to mark the anniversary in a supposed decolonial gesture. But as our work progressed, the biggest national political crisis in postcolonial history unfolded. At the end of June 2021, following several weeks of peaceful petitions for political and economic reforms, thousands of Swati citizens (emaSwati from now onwards) took to the streets throughout the country to protest the rule of the absolute monarchy – still Africa's last – and were met with brutal violence.

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Unrest had started earlier in May 2021, when hundreds of students protested police brutality in the aftermath of the death of 25-year-old activist and UNESWA law student, Thabani Nkomonye, who is widely believed to have been killed by traffic police officers (P. Dlamini 2021). State security responses to the protests, including physical violence against hundreds of attendees at Nkomonye's funeral, renewed and galvanised the broader movement for democracy among the public and select Members of Parliament (MP), namely Mduduzi 'Magawugawu' Simelane, Mthandeni Dube, and Mduduzi Bacede Mabuza. In June, demonstrators began to formally demand a range of political and economic reforms through petitions at their respective *tinkhundla*, royalist state-delineated areas that operate as MP constituencies, each clustering several chiefdoms. The spread of demonstrations to rural areas was pervasive – almost all *tinkhundla* received petitions – and caught the regime unprepared. Citing COVID-19 prevention, the government halted in-person petitions on 24 June, effectively refusing to engage in dialogue.

This was the turning point. Afterwards, demonstrators blocked roads and burned or looted large commercial properties and farms linked to the state, and local shops. Confrontations with the police escalated, and the army was brought in to quash the ensuing protests and search for suspected looters, invading peoples' homes and destroying property. According to activists' reports, security forces killed between 70 and 100 people and injured hundreds more (Amnesty International n.d.). MTN, eSwatini's main telecom services provider, confirmed that the eSwatini government gave directives to shut down service during this time (Dayimani 2021). We see this wave of protests as unique in Swati history, as they swept across rural areas that had been, until recently, less active in pro-democracy politics or more strongly supported the monarchy. Amid the state's rampage and indiscriminate torturing and killing, citizens, journalists, academics, and external observers who knew the country well immediately understood that they were witnessing something very different from previous waves of popular protests and regime repression.

Other protests and strikes have followed the tragic events of June–July 2021, with an intense phase in the second half of 2021. In mid-July 2021, the king held *sibaya*, a public dialogue at the Ludzidzini royal residence, where he summoned the nation only to criticise protesters, dismissively calling them 'marijuana smokers' (Mbuyisa 2021). That month, the pro-democracy MPs Dube and Mabuza were arrested and remain imprisoned awaiting trial, with bail applications denied repeatedly by the state-appointed judges, and at the time of writing, Magawugawu is still in hiding. Demonstrations spread to primary and secondary schools, and amid further COVID-19 concerns and economic stagnation, schools episodically closed across the country (see Motsa, this issue). Several visits by delegations from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) took place from July 2021 onwards, but with little, if any, visible impact on the monarchy's course of actions.

Freer dialogue, networking, and critical documentation of this historic moment among civil society and activist organisations, much of it online, were central to the 2022 formation of the Multi-Stakeholder Forum (MSF), an umbrella organisation that helps to unify and mobilise its diverse, pro-democratic membership.[1] Then, another shocking murder shook the nation: on 21 January 2023, well known and highly acclaimed lawyer and human rights advocate Thulani Maseko – who had been a staunch opposer of the monarchy throughout his career and leader of the MSF – was shot dead at his home

(Fabricius 2023). There are widespread suspicions that state security forces might have been involved (Africa Research Bulletin 2023). In the meantime, sections of the opposition are now allegedly involved in open conflict with the regime, with unverified reports that a group known as the Solidarity Forces is behind – and claims responsibility for – burnings and bombings of government officials' houses and government agencies (Z.M. Dlamini 2022).

To date, the state has been unwilling to concede anything to the legitimate claims of pro-democracy protesters and continues with unjustifiable repression of activists and citizens (Africa Research Bulletin 2023). A political dialogue between the king and the opposition forces, something that has been advocated by many internal and external actors to try to resolve the impasse, has not materialised. The monarchy and the state security apparatus are not new to repression and violence, but up to 2021, aggressive tactics had been used more sparingly and usually targeted urban activists in Manzini and some more proletarianized rural areas in the east of the country (Forrester and Laterza 2014). The centralisation of political, military, and economic power in the kingship has been going on for some time, with increased military spending (IRIN 2011), and growing penetration of capitalist interests closely allied with the king in national politics.[2] Another recent and essential factor of popular discontent is the devastating socioeconomic effects of COVID-19 restrictions early in the pandemic. Eswatini's PM Ambrose Dlamini was the world's first head of state to die from the disease while in office (BBC 2020), and public health restrictions brought the country into recession: 2020 was the first time since 1976 that the country registered negative annual GDP growth (–1.6%). The fiscal crisis that followed led to a USD 110 million emergency support loan from the International Monetary Fund, agreed to in July 2020 (IMF 2020). At the time of writing (July 2023), the situation in eSwatini seems dire. As regards the special issue, 'celebration' certainly assumed a wholly inappropriate ring: what was there to celebrate when faced with such tragic events?

These events and the dramatic political tensions have inevitably shaped our thinking as editors of this collection. This introduction is a way to frame the original project and aims within the current historical conjuncture. Due to the timeline of production, only one article in this selection (Motsa, this issue) touches directly on events related to the 2021 protests and their aftermath. We have positioned this article at the end, not to signal any lack of relevance, but rather to mark the closing of the special issue – which really is an opening to a new and very uncertain period that is likely to grip the country for some time. The June–July 2021 moment made us rethink the bulk of the collection to reflect a periodised social history of postcolonial eSwatini, from 1968 to 2021, from independence to the wake of COVID-19 and the current political economic crisis. In other words, the current crisis may indeed signal the end of an era – the ending of authoritarianism and beginning of dictatorship, perhaps (Laterza 2021) – but it is impossible to make predictions at this stage as to when or if a new dispensation might emerge. Still, we think it is unlikely that whatever will follow will be a return to 'business as usual' or 'life as normal'.

In this opening essay, we try to map key contours of this postcolonial order, which we identify as 'customary nationalism'. We see this period as one marked by increasingly authoritarian rule by the postcolonial Swati monarchy, engaged in constant attempts to domesticate what are posited as 'external' socio-cultural forces and global capitalism.

The function of the ideology of customary nationalism is to maintain a distinct and unitary national identity as emaSwati that is at the same time closely aligned with an interpretation and political articulation of custom that serves the interests of the ruling royal elite. In so doing, we also highlight the existence of multiple interpretations and practices of custom that, while interacting with royalist versions, are different and more in line with the interests and aspirations of other disadvantaged groups of Swati citizens (Bowen 1993; Laterza 2015; Golomski 2018; G.S. Dlamini, this issue). We also move beyond interpretations of Swati politics that have tended to oversimplify the ideological rule of the monarchy as the result of some kind of uncritical endorsement of royal custom by the majority of rural emaSwati. Our interpretation remains strongly rooted in political economy, but we try to complicate the somewhat-simplified class analysis posited in much of the classic and more recent Swati literature influenced by the 1970s southern African Marxist school (e.g., Daniel 1982; Levin 1997), and offer instead a biopolitical approach to Swati customary nationalism that emphasises the emerging deep conflicts and fissures from within the nation that are likely to shape the future to come.

We first provide a brief overview of the political economic and geographic issues that have characterised postcolonial eSwatini as essential context to understand the ideology of customary nationalism. After a general treatment of this concept and a brief presentation of our biopolitical analytical approach, we present three key dimensions of identity that articulate customary nationalism in practice: race and ethnicity; gender; and class. Almost all the articles in the special issue contribute to the understanding of at least one such dimension, and their contribution is briefly highlighted in these sections. The final section comes back to where we started – the current moment of crisis of customary nationalism – and reframes it as a terrain where struggles for democracy are taking centre stage. Our approach to current tensions aims to challenges narrow Eurocentric understandings of democracy and take into account the complex entanglement of histories, practices, and challenges that have shaped the lives of emaSwati today. We also provide some reflections on key issues of social cohesion and postcolonial nation-building that are likely to shape how more progressive futures might look.

Long-term economic crisis

Today's widespread poverty and deepening socioeconomic inequalities have historical roots: as a labour reserve for the South African economy, eSwatini suffered directly not only from British colonial rule, but also from the consequences of apartheid in South Africa. When the monarchy regained political control over the country in 1968, king Sobhuza II shunted local political opposition and did not reform the highly unequal colonial economic system. Royal elites allied with white owners and managers closely connected to South African, British and other Western capital, whose power was left virtually untouched and extended to most economic sectors. Despite its small size, the influence and power of the white community is still considerable, and white interests continue to be prominent in the sugar industry, timber, textiles, fruit production and canning and parts of the service sector. Alongside South African and Western investors, foreign capital includes Taiwan and Nigeria, among others. Over time, the share of ownership

and control by royals and royally connected businesspeople and managers working closely with white and foreign capital has increased. But for the vast majority of black emaSwati, the chances of getting a decently paid job in the private sector have always been slim. A small but growing, relatively autonomous black bourgeoisie of professionals has had to make major efforts to break through the invisible ceilings of racial discrimination by white capital and political patronage by the royal establishment (Forrester and Laterza 2014). Meanwhile, high-level royals, royally connected people and the small but very wealthy white community have continued to thrive through good times and bad (Cabrita 2021).

These class and race dynamics make eSwatini one of the most unequal countries in the world. With a GINI coefficient at 54.6 (2016), the country has the 6th highest income inequality in the world.[3] 78% of the Swati population lives on USD 6.85 a day or less (2016).[4,5] Demographically, young precarious workers and unemployed people who took to the streets in 2021 were quite likely part of this 78%, as 56% of the population is also under 25 and the median age is 21.7 (World Bank Group 2020, 57). Their already fragile economic position likely deteriorated during the first phase of the pandemic, as COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions caused major job losses, following a decade of already weak economic performance.[6] General unemployment rose from 22.8% in 2019 to 25.1% in 2020, and stayed around the same levels in 2021 and 2022.[7] Youth unemployment grew from 47.3% in 2019 to 51.9% in 2020 – and decreased to 49.8% in 2022, remaining above pre-pandemic levels.[8] Workers in the formal sector receive appallingly low wages and little social protection (ITUC 2016) – on both counts, they are worse off than in neighbouring South Africa, which is already well known for highly exploitative and hostile labour conditions, and has comparable living costs.[9] Those who do not have a formal job get by with precarious informal economic activities or subsistence farming – maize is the main crop in the rural areas, and the illegal growing of cannabis provides crucial income for many rural emaSwati (Dewa 2021). These trends all suggest a significant socioeconomic crisis and turning point for the country.

Customary land as welfare state

Until the recent turmoil, despite the worsening inequalities, the postcolonial political system had been relatively stable compared to many other African countries. A major stabilising factor was customary land tenure in rural areas which has served as a buffer from destitution for many emaSwati (Laterza 2015) in the face of both economic precarity and serial public health crises around TB, HIV/AIDS, and then COVID-19. As a place to live and farm, often with longstanding familial and communal supports, customary land has been key to the survival of many citizens.

Customary land tenure is largely based on *khonta*, the right of any Swati married male to pay tribute to a chief in return for a piece of land on Swati Nation Land (SNL). Historically, this has meant that, for a minimal price, a man could obtain usufruct for life of a piece of land where he could build his homestead and conduct agricultural and other activities as he wished. The right of use is automatically transferred to his relatives, the only requirement being that the land allocated remains occupied in some form. While land disputes and boundary disputes over chieftaincy borders are frequent (Rose 1992),

evictions are rare. The 2005 Constitution addressed the gender bias of customary practice, specifying that 'a citizen of [eSwatini], without regard to gender, shall have equal access to land for normal domestic purposes' (2005 Constitution of Eswatini, 211 (2)). In practice, there are several reports that the Constitution has not often been applied in this respect (IWHRC 2009), and gender bias is only partially redressed by the customary practice whereby women can do *khonta* if represented by their male son or another close male relative (Rose 1992). Unmarried men also face significant discrimination, as they are often not seen as suitable subjects by chiefs – and this is a significant factor given that many struggle to find the resources for *lobola*, the brideprice in cash or cows paid by the groom's family to the bride's family. In general, wages in the formal sector are so low that most workers cannot afford houses on the private market. For most emaSwati, land obtained in the rural areas (known as *emakhaya*, which literally means 'homes') is the only chance to have their own piece of land and build a house for retirement. Agricultural activities on this land also help subsidise wages.

The land tenure system is a direct evolution of the British colonial Land Partition Act of 1907, when emaSwati were pushed in designated 'Native Reserves', and this land was separated from title deed land under the ownership of British and Afrikaner settlers and white-owned companies. The legacy of the British colonial dual system cannot be underestimated. Sichone (2001) rightly emphasises how crucial the particular colonial arrangements concerning land tenure and settlement were and still are for determining the material and structural constraints on internal migration and patterns of urban settlement in southern Africa. While most rural land that is not owned on the private market falls under SNL, many townships on the outskirts of the major urban centres of Mbabane, Matsapha, and Manzini are also under the jurisdiction of chiefs.[10] Some parcels have been converted into title deed land, whereby occupants acquired title deed for free to allow town councils to charge rates to recoup costs for urban services like waste collection, sewage, and water distribution (H.Y. Simelane 2012; 2016; Sihlongonyane and H. Simelane 2017). The peculiarity of the Swati case vis-à-vis countries such as Zambia or even South Africa – where the partition took place in a more brutal manner – consists in the pervasiveness of the 'rural' in physical and symbolic terms due to the close proximity of urban and rural areas. Rural areas under customary land tenure surround all major towns and are easily reachable by road.

The rule of the monarchy has employed an ideology that gives customary law and land tenure prominence and conceives of the king as the 'guardian of tradition', placing emphasis on social conservatism and preservation of heritage – what in the literature has been often referred to as 'traditionalism' (Macmillan 1985), and, later in this article, we reconceptualise as 'customary nationalism'. The monarchy plays the dual role of keen ally of white and foreign capital in the formal sector and overseer of the customary tenure system in the rural areas. Royalist idioms and practices are at the same time 'global' and 'local' (Cook and Hardin 2013).

There are however significant pressures that are seriously threatening the viability of this welfare role historically played by customary land. There have been significant large-scale development projects on prime land under customary tenure nearby major towns, from hotels to office buildings and residences. New development incites renewed fears around the possibility of eviction and relocation (Amnesty International 2018). A fairly recent example is the 2013–2014 government construction of a new

airport – named after the current king – in the underdeveloped south-eastern community of Sikhuphe, involving the mass exhumation of nearly 200 graves, displacement of residents in the area and damage to their homes despite protest (Golomski 2018; Environmental Justice Atlas 2021). Pressing issues around the *khonta* process include forgery schemes and excessive payment demands from some chiefs (S. Nkambule 2018; Mazibuko 2022). Other forms of speculation are emerging, where vernacular land markets see wealthier emaSwati buying out poorer residents in dire need of cash, who then remain landless (Laterza, interview data). These recent trends exacerbate long-term inequalities in the aforementioned classed and racialised distribution of land. Finding up to date information on these inequalities is particularly hard. To our knowledge, there is no systematic analysis available that provides an accurate description of land ownership in contemporary eSwatini.[11]

Our interview data suggest that, since the 2021 protests, calls from rural residents to radically reform the land tenure system have emerged, with many protesters discussing the possibility that chiefs be stripped of their powers to allocate land in favour of community trusts with more democratic and accountable structures. It is too early to say, however, how prevalent these demands might be, and what effects they will have, if any, on future political developments. More broadly, empirical research is needed into the role that the dwindling access to customary land is having on the material conditions of emaSwati, their perceptions and understandings of political and economic crisis, and how land politics figure in the recent waves of mass protests against the state.

The biopolitics of customary nationalism

This political economic and geographic context provides important background to understand eSwatini today and the issues and debates represented in this special issue, which, with the exception of Hlandze, do not deal with political economy explicitly. When we first developed the call, we were quite broad in our scope, as a way to explore from the ground up what scholars of and in eSwatini had been working on recently, and develop themes and connections based on those interests. A potent thread connecting the articles involved aspects of identity. This was not surprising, given that identity and its multiple politics have been at the centre of recent developments in postcolonial African studies, and the unique context of eSwatini warrants more content-specific analyses. As we know from debates within the field, identities can be conceptualised and understood in rather different ways – from more flexible, shifting and negotiated boundaries and connections proposed by frameworks such as those of Nyamnjoh's (2017, 2022) conviviality and incompleteness, to more rigid political identities shaped by the colonial legacy that are at the centre of Mamdani's (1996) work. More recent critical iterations of blackness – contrasting to but drawing in part from Black feminist theories in the Global North – resituate African peoples' identities and lifeworlds in and of themselves first, and coeval in relation to other Black diasporas (Lewis and Baderoon 2021; Qambela 2022; Canham 2023). The articles by our special issue contributors deftly touch on aspects of this newer research and theorising around postcolonial identities from the vantage point of a context marked by unique political and cultural machinations. Their contributions bring issues of race and ethnicity, gender, and class to the fore in building on and expanding previous understandings of the social life and history of postcolonial eSwatini. But

what does this context show us about 'identity' specifically? What local structural scaffolding or encompassing realities are these identities built on?

From the point of view of the monarchy, but also of many emaSwati who practise and innovate it in their everyday life, the most obvious answer to the question is: custom. Custom is also one of the most debated and contested topics in the academic literature on eSwatini. Macmillan's (1985) insightful explanation of the ideology of traditionalism employed by king Sobhuza II to lead eSwatini through the early postcolonial years holds today as it did then: Sobhuza's 'selective modernisation' both politically and constitutionally remains a key pillar of the monarchy's approach to culture and national identity (H.P. Dlamini 2019). Custom is supposed to act as a mediator between the 'inside' of Swati culture and forces 'external' to it – in this way, custom is not anti-modern or non-modern, but rather shapes the way Swati modernities unfold (see also Karlström 2004; McGovern 2012; Nkwi 2015). Other understandings of royal custom as hegemony popular in academic and activist literature that took inspiration from the 1970s southern African Marxist school – the most notable of them is Levin's (1997) – are only partially right. While it is true, as Levin (1997) argues, that the monarchy has used custom to impose its own rule and gain legitimacy, especially in the rural areas, this view of custom tends to lack the nuance that a fine-grained Gramscian or more critical anthropological approach would require. In Levin's approach, custom is conceptualised as an unsophisticated ideology through which rural people are indoctrinated, somewhat devoid of full political agency. Other literature (Bowen 1993; Laterza 2015; Golomski 2018; G.S. Dlamini, this issue) notes that custom as it is practised and reinvented daily by hundreds of thousands of emaSwati, is more than royal custom, and many of its features could indeed be harnessed for progressive change with a different political dispensation (Laterza 2015, 157).

But perhaps what is missing, even from more nuanced approaches to Swati custom, is an explicit theoretical understanding of the relationship between royalty and custom as one that involves serious biopolitical work. In a striking postcolonial example, each year the royalty still publicly summons and organises tens of thousands of emaSwati across gendered age grades to participate in annual national rituals such as the *iNcwala* and the *uMhlanga* reed dance. Their rich tapestry of symbolism, bodily and material engagements and national bonding through exchange and reproduction of life substances, show indeed that there is something more at work than simply a political elite orchestrating a national ideology, or an etiquette and an outlook towards life practised tacitly in myriads of mundane everyday interactions.[12] A nation and its associated life forces are produced and reproduced each year through these rituals and in close interaction with the state. The royal oligarchy plays a key role here in mediating this relationship, overseeing a complex system of division of labour between genders, generations, multiple clans, and ritual specialists. This is a testament to a dynamism and flexibility within such national ideologies that have much in common with Nyamnjoh's (2017, 2022) approach to African epistemologies, but can also degenerate into bigoted and reactionary postures – as in Mamdani's (1996) account of ethnic identities of colonial and apartheid origins – when manipulated by rulers who feel under threat, as the recent descent into state violence shows. Within this ideological framework, the king and the queen mother, as guardians of custom, allegedly guarantee the production and reproduction of life in the Swati nation as a whole.

With this in mind, we prefer to relabel what is commonly referred to in the literature as Swati traditionalism – or politically and commercially reified as 'Swati culture' (Cook and Hardin 2013; Golomski 2018) – into 'customary nationalism'. The emphasis on nation and nationalism is also particularly important from today's vantage point, as the exclusionary and reactionary elements of Swati nationalism are widening in both regional and global contexts marked by similar trends toward racialised authoritarianism and economic regression. And once the Swati nation is recentred as the main biopolitical entity of eSwatini's postcolonial dispensation – not as a monolithic immutable bounded formation, but as a dynamic, complex, and contradictory ecology or assemblage, some parts of which are now in deep conflict – we are better analytically positioned to understand the diversity of contemporary identities and specific lines of tensions and fissures that characterise the nation today which could possibly produce regime change.

At present, the category of 'customary nationalism' may be too broad and encompassing to provide much analytical import on its own, and this introductory essay is not meant to theorise it comprehensively. Still, we contend that there is barely any domain of postcolonial life in eSwatini which does not feature, in some fundamental way, a dialectic between issues of custom and nation. How this dialectic operates in practice, however, is contingent on multiple biopolitical tensions and dimensions of identity formation we draw out in this special issue.

We use the term 'biopolitical' here in the expanded and revised conception of anthropologist Didier Fassin (2009), which moves away from a narrow Foucaldian understanding of biopolitics as the management of populations through specific techniques of government and power, towards a broader focus on the politics of 'life as such' (Fassin 2009, 48), which, in Fassin's words, refers to:

> life as the course of events which occurs from birth to death, which can be shortened by political or structural violence, which can be prolonged by health and social policies, which gives place to cultural interpretations and moral decisions, which may be told or written – life which is lived through a body (not only through cells) and as a society (not only as species). (Fassin 2009, 48)

Fassin's re-elaboration allows us to move beyond the deployment of biopolitical paradigms for the study of only one form of modernity – in this case, the role of the formal state derived from colonial or apartheid structures in the management of populations. Customary nationalism as an alternative modernity has its own biopolitics, but one that does not neatly map onto Foucauldian understandings of governmentality and biopower.[13]

In his account of the nuanced multi-domain dealings of Zimbabwean Shona-speaking villagers with the encompassing force of custom, Nhemachena notes that *chivanhu*, a local term for custom, refers to, among other things, 'the rules that one is expected to follow, the vernacular modes of engagement and of thought that are enshrined in what is called *hunhu* [humanity, the quality of being human]' (Nhemachena 2017, 28). Nhemachena's definition hints at an important dimension of the biopolitics of custom: the discursive and material conceptualisation and regulation of appropriate behaviour in domestic and public settings – or, to use Fassin's words:

> [e]tymologically apprehended biopolitics is not merely a politics of population but is about life and more specifically about inequalities in life which we could call bio-inequalities […]:

> it is about not only normalizing people's lives, but also deciding the sort of life people may or may not live. (Fassin 2009, 49)

These understandings might provide a more nuanced analytical approach to the struggles for freedom and democracy in eSwatini, that breaks away from narrow Eurocentric ideals of the atomised individual endowed with abstract universal rights that rarely translate into practice (Englund 2006).

The biopolitics of customary nationalism features in different ways in all the articles in this special issue. It provides the broader frame for increasingly exclusionary dynamics of Swati citizenship discussed by G.S. Dlamini (this issue), and contestations within the traditionalist camp around the role of women in national politics (H.P. Dlamini-a, this issue). It is at the centre of discursive contestations between global health agencies and the Swati royal ruling class about the role of gender- and sexual-based violence and inequalities in the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Golomski, this issue). It informs the ambiguous position of the previous monarch, king Sobhuza II, about the role that whites and whiteness played in the country after independence from the British (H.P. Dlamini-b, this issue). Ideologies and practices around customary nationalism complicate Swati workers' historical relationship with the pro-democracy movement and undermine a straightforward Marxist class analysis that would unambiguously pit workers' interests against those of the monarchy (Hlandze, this issue). The multiple tensions inherent in customary nationalism can be seen in Malambe and Harford's (this issue) call for raising the profile of siSwati, which highlights how indigenous language (re)vitalisation is counterhegemonic to the globalised, postcolonial use of English as well as a vehicle for wider civic and political participation. Finally, the 2021 school protests discussed by Motsa (this issue) are part of a broader mass movement against the status quo of customary nationalism.

In the following sections, we provide a brief overview of how aspects of this formation – namely race and ethnicity, gender, and class – reconfigure the dialectic between custom and nation and diversify biopolitical struggles for democracy and freedom.

Race and ethnicity

It is hard to overestimate the colonial legacy of racial constructs and enforced racial discrimination on eSwatini's postcolonial life. Open discussions of race and racism tend to be more muted there than in neighbouring South Africa, and there is a general tendency in public discourse across different social, ethnic, and racial groups to underplay the role of racial difference, with common tropes about generally good interracial relations (black and white), and the country's apparent lack of racial conflict versus South Africa (again, referring to black and white). Despite such prevailing statements, racial discrimination against black emaSwati is still quite frequent in workplaces owned by members of white communities where a significant amount of middle and top managers are not black (Bezuidenhout 2004; Laterza 2016), and hostilities toward the 'Asian' community, broadly construed, are also documented (Economist Intelligence Unit 2016). Even more insidious is the continued dominance in some circles of an ideology of racial distinction, where black people and white people are conceived as fundamentally different and their 'cultures' not conducive to mixing and interracial marriages, despite the existence of several, somewhat dynastic mixed-race families.[14]

H.P. Dlamini (-b this issue) zooms in on the role of race and racism in the negotiations around the postcolonial constitutional arrangements in the years leading to independence. Dlamini's article hits at the core of the ambivalent relationship that the royal regime maintained with white interests: Sobhuza II allied with white settlers and the South African apartheid state to curb the influence of black progressives on the constitutional deal, as royal traditionalists and the white community saw the demands of black progressives for universal suffrage and multi-party democracy as a threat to their respective interests. As Dlamini notes, this overt political alliance was dissolved after the sweeping electoral victory of the monarchist party in the 1964 transition elections. Since then, the monarchy has kept a close relationship with white capital in many sectors of the economy, especially in the sugar industry. This has influenced the social and economic development of the country up to the present day. The balance of power between white and black actors in the economy has somewhat shifted because of gradual transformations in capital ownership and management structures in neighbouring South Africa and growing black South African investments in eSwatini. Yet, the economy remains heavily racialised insofar as the monarchy has not addressed the twinned problems of race and class discrimination. In not pushing for a more encompassing definition of racial discrimination that would go beyond use of overt racial slurs (CERD 1997), the monarchy has shielded itself from sustained evaluation and scrutiny over its alliance with white and foreign capital. Today, despite the widespread racialisation of eSwatini's economy and society, the census does not report any data on race and most structured surveys carried out in the country do not include race as a variable.

An approach to customary nationalism as a racialising phenomenon aligns well with Mamdani's (1996) analysis of colonial and postcolonial political identities based on race and ethnicity. In recent years, government, parliament, and pro-monarchy media rode on and intensified a wave of increasing resentment and hate against people of Asian descent, fuelling misgiven perceptions of an 'invasion'. In 2016, the government closed borders for all Asians (Economist Intelligence Unit 2016), and the *Swazi Observer*, owned by the national trust fund Tibiyo Taka Ngwane (which is closely tied to royal business interests), fuelled disinformation that hugely exaggerated the numbers of people of Asian origin (Swazi Media Commentary 2016). A parliamentary commission of enquiry was established, further giving credence to bogus claims and misguided negative perceptions. According to the well-established independent magazine *The Nation* (Ndlangamandla 2017), the report of the commission was filled with xenophobic statements about Asian businesses and business owners.[15] According to Ndlangamandla (2017, 20), alongside blanket statements about exploitative labour practices by Asian businesses, the report also claimed that 'unlike the Asians, the European foreigners abide by the country's law and standards', effectively keeping out of sight whites' tendencies towards self-segregation in wealthy and racially homogenous communities that continue to tolerate, if not harbour, discriminatory practices and discourses. Regional apartheid-era hierarchies that victimise Asians and other nonblack people as a subordinate racial group to whites and project whites (here also seemingly referred to as 'Europeans', as in old colonial speech) as a positive force for the country, are reproduced in the postcolonial era, with the effect of serving the interests of both the monarchy (either looking for scapegoats to justify macroeconomic mismanagement, or geopolitical influence in the case of Taiwan; Sikhondze 2023) and most of the white community (intent on keeping wealth and privilege out of sight).

G.S. Dlamini's (this issue) discussion of changing practices and understandings around Swati citizenship marked by the introduction of the National Identity Card (NIC) provides a counterpoint to a Mamdanian understanding of Swati racial and national identities. Dlamini focuses on two case studies of prominent and respected members of the national community who found themselves labelled as 'illegal immigrants' by the authorities. She argues that the fixating, singular power of the NIC has replaced, or heavily curbed, the previous system of establishing Swati citizenship. This system was much more informal and relied more on a person showing their socialisation in Swati ways of life through appropriate cultural and linguistic behaviour (see also Malambe and Harford, this issue), than a boundary-making, categorical either/or logic that set apart citizens and non-citizens. The more flexible approach to citizenship has been part of postcolonial Swati customary nationalism for a long time, and indicates that, despite racial and ethnic fissures that tend to categorise 'proper' emaSwati as black subjects belonging to the Swati nation through blood ties, there is a parallel and intertwined complex of practices that also make Swatiness about interconnection and interdependence between human beings engaged in concrete social relations that are dynamic and evolving. As Dlamini rightly notes, this understanding is not only germane to eSwatini but found and theorised in other postcolonial African countries too (Englund and Nyamnjoh 2004; Nyamnjoh 2007).

Malambe and Harford (this issue) examine the current status of siSwati, the 'first' or 'mother' language of nearly all black emaSwati, and how its ongoing disuse in nation-level governmental matters, business, higher education and journalism reflects its 'low status' compared to white European colonisers' languages like English which remains the country's other official language. They trace how English prevailed as a means of power in and after the colonial era as general education in the local language was underdeveloped (see also Motsa, this issue). Malambe and Harford's call to 'raise the profile' of siSwati, in turn, redresses this racialised linguistic inequality or 'hierarchy'. This can happen both through national policymaking and standardisation as well as in everyday practice in 'translanguaging', whereby the country's majority black students are encouraged to use both siSwati and English to further legitimise the former.

Still, schools are political spaces as well. Current siSwati curricular materials like textbooks strongly rearticulate forms of customary nationalism in images and texts around stereotyped elements of Swati culture as inextricably linked to kingship, and yet, as Motsa (this issue) shows, students are key, dissenting agents who challenge royalty, often using transnational antiracist social movements' language (#SwaziLivesMatter, #eSwatiniLivesMatter) to put customary nationalism in crisis. At the same time, during the 2021 protests, xenophobic aspects of customary nationalism cut across pro-democracy and pro-monarchy lines, where each side accused the other of receiving support from black foreign forces: from the alleged (but unverified) use of Equatorial Guinean mercenaries by the state (SABC News 2021; Z.M. Dlamini 2021) to the progressive, black Pan-Africanist, South African Economic Freedom Fighters' support of demonstrators (Myeni 2022). These exclusionary dynamics again hint at similar trends in other parts of the world.

Gender

Articulations of gender are central to accessing and differentiating power – who has it or does not, when, where, and how – and the naturalisation and politicisation of gendered

norms are central to the regulation of biological and social reproduction under customary nationalism. Historically, eSwatini's Dlamini monarchy has operated as a diarchy in some nation-level domains, where a king's mother (the queen mother) stands as a separate sovereign or co-sovereign in ritual or ceremonial matters deemed important for gendered generations in the general population. Royal women like the luminary strategist Labotsibeni (1858–1925) have led the Swati polity as queen regents and mothers during unstable and interregnum periods in both colonial and postcolonial eras.

Still, even elite women are effectively undermined in politics despite their abilities and popularity. H.P. Dlamini (-a this issue) throws light on this in focusing on the political parable of Gelane Simelane Zwane, the contemporary female politician, chief's daughter and Dlamini royal, who, despite major resistance and hostility from male sectors of the traditionalist camp, has been able to inherit the chieftaincy of Kontshingila village from her father. In her struggle to remain installed as the rightful chief, Zwane managed to stand up to the militant patriarchal factions of the royal regime and, in 2014, achieved an unprecedented victory in the Supreme Court, which stated that her chieftaincy was legitimate and opened the way for changing the customary expectation that chiefly roles are a male monopoly. Her rise to Senate President – in a parliament dominated by men – and the subsequent embattled departure from the position, show how patriarchal forces push elite women like her over the cliff of the glass ceiling they have surmounted (H.P. Dlamini-a, this issue). For women engaged in democratic or anti-royalist politics, elite or not, their actions can lead to social expulsion and historical erasure, as Cabrita (2023) shows for the life of esteemed activist and anthropologist Regina Gelana Twala who died on the eve of Swati independence.

At national and multinational levels, social constructions of gender and women's status in the country are also means to wield political power as part of maintaining customary nationalism or interrogating it. Golomski (this issue) provides a nuanced analysis of the often-problematic conjoining of gender and reified notions of traditionalism by global health agencies and NGOs working to reduce the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS in eSwatini. These discourses tend to depict 'Swati culture' as inherently patriarchal, with women in a subordinate position to men, subjugated by fixed and changeless gendered cultural norms. While we certainly do not want to underplay the extent of gender inequality and gender-based violence in the country, these phenomena are too often – and often unwittingly – portrayed in racialised ways that perpetuate colonial tropes about some inherent negativity and 'backwardness' ascribed to black African cultures. What is noticeable in the dominant discourses in national media and civil society forums is that gender-based violence and its prevention are rarely foregrounded or analysed comparatively with other regional and global cases.

For the majority of women and girls in eSwatini, as well as gender and sexual minorities, they face the prospect of a more inclusive citizenship alongside the unnerving reality that masculinist behaviour and biases – both explicitly in reified iterations of custom or culture and implicitly in practice – shape access to power and daily life. When it comes to the issue of customary land allocation, the picture seems to be more nuanced than the dominant NGO narratives suggest. As H.Y. Simelane's (2012) work shows, Swati statutory law (inherited from the colonial era) is highly discriminatory of women, suggesting that patriarchy is a much broader issue than a narrow preoccupation with custom or traditionalism allows for. While it is true that newer gender equality

provisions, outlined in the 2005 constitution, speak to women's inheritance and land allocations, these points are often not followed. Women rely on male kin proxies to access land and capital. Women-headed households, childless adult women, and single women with children are all part of contemporary urban and rural communities, even as they do not conform to customary expectations of the heteronormative family. Despite their relative socioeconomic status, younger, upwardly mobile women also face gender-based violence (Fielding-Miller et al. 2021). And despite a decline in informal polygynous marriages, child marriage, and arranged marriages, patriarchy still manifests in other ways – like women–women criticism and gossip within and between families and communities – that have interrelated economic, material, and health-related consequences (Malambo 2021; Berner-Rodoreda et al. 2023). LGBTQ + citizens proudly exist in eSwatini and put on the first Pride in 2018 but still face considerable stigma and political discrimination in civil society (Kennedy et al. 2013; Itai 2023). In its range and intertwining at national and domestic levels, the biopolitics of customary nationalism may help explain how agentive practices and proscriptive norms, not unrelated to the racialised political economy, create conditions of both manoeuvre and constraint for Swati women, girls, and gender and sexual minorities in the early twenty-first century.

Class

Class is a hotly debated issue in the academic literature on eSwatini, with a strand of authors published in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Daniel 1982; Neocosmos 1987; Levin 1997) that were heavily influenced by the southern African Marxist school of the 1970s, which posited their critique of apartheid South Africa and its regional economy in orthodox Marxist terms (e.g., Wolpe 1972; Davies et al. 1976; Legassick and Wolpe 1976). This scholarship has also been strongly opposed to the rule of the monarchy from early on – more recent work on labour and democracy maintains this strong oppositional stance, but the influence of Marxist class analysis is somewhat fading into the background (e.g., H.S. Simelane 2012; 2016; Delby 2014). As mentioned before, much of this literature tends to uncritically posit rural masses as somewhat ideologically 'brainwashed' by the monarchy, and to gloss over the interdependence of urban workers and rural residents – something which would significantly complicate conventional Marxist class analysis. Having said that, scholars in this tradition rightly highlight that there has been a core of workers organising through trade unions for a very long time – at independence, despite increasing attacks on their rights to organise, unions were given more freedom to operate than opposition parties.

However, as Hlandze (this issue) shows, the history of the relationship between labour organising and pro-democracy movements is not a straightforward one. In recent years, there have been internal power struggles within the unions between those who have seen unions and their members as a necessary ally of the pro-democracy movement, and others who have preferred a clearer separation between mobilising for economic rights (such as higher wages and better working conditions) and collective action for political reforms. Several waves of strikes in eSwatini through its colonial and postcolonial history have shown how much emaSwati (urban and rural) appreciate the need to fight for the betterment of their often-dismal wages and working conditions. We also know that, until the 2021 protest wave, these forms of mobilisation have not always, or even

most times, translated into mass support for an overhaul of the political system. Hlandze's article plays an important role in Swati historiography: it is clearly located in the pro-democracy strand of literature influenced by Marxist analysis but, at the same time, offers a more nuanced picture than many of its predecessors, which helps contextualise the claims of this important body of work.

From the perspective of the monarchy, the royal regime has always been opposed to strong working class and urban identities with their own autonomous associational life. Postcolonial history has seen varying degrees of freedom of labour organising and of repression of such rights, with a significant worsening of unions' right to organise in recent years. The kind of biopolitics fostered by Swati customary nationalism sees struggles over resources and rights in the formal wage economy, and the ensuing class conflicts, as a threat to the unity and interdependence of the nation – customary nationalism effectively tries to domesticate the dual political and economic legacy of colonialism by asserting the primacy of custom over all domains of economic life, including wage labour. In the early years of independence, the monarchy tried to foster more pliable elected works councils over independent workers' unions (Levin 1997, 88–91), while in recent times TUCOSWA, the main trade union confederation, has been the target of sustained government harassment (Sibisi 2012). Of course, this is as much a way to assert the biopolitics of customary nationalism over the realm of work as is about reducing the power and voice of organisations that tend to be led by people who have an open pro-democracy agenda.

Biopolitical struggles for democracy

If we move away from the simplified Marxist class analysis of the literature mentioned in the previous section, how can we then understand the current moment of deep conflict and widespread protests against the royal regime? We propose here a reconceptualisation of the mass movement for democracy in eSwatini as the intensification of biopolitical struggles led by those who have been symbolically and materially marginalised by the postcolonial system of customary nationalism. These struggles feature in large numbers, but are not limited to, the youth, the unemployed and the precariously employed, who carry with them a diverse range of claims and demands across multiple identity lines, and are now pushing for a radical overhaul of the system.

The reactionary protection of customary nationalism in the form of extended state violence by the monarchy is yet one more sign of the deep crisis the system is undergoing. The fragile consensus that saw the monarchy, until 2021, still commanding support of large parts of rural areas as well as sections of the urban middle classes, is largely gone – most telling in this respect is the mass desertion of key national rituals such as the *iNcwala* and *uMhlanga*, a kind of silent protest that is as effective as mass demonstrations in communicating the profound discontent with the current state of affairs by large sectors of the population that have not been historically opposed to the monarchy. The brutal response of the state apparatus is also a tragic indication that the biopolitics of customary nationalism is rapidly descending into a necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) where the death and suffering of whoever is opposed to the king's rule are justified by the alleged 'necessity' to perpetuate the current system – and ultimately protect the king as the 'undisputed' head of this dispensation.

In the final article in this selection, Motsa (this issue) focuses on the motivations and consequences of the school protests that have intermittently swept the country from September 2021 onwards – another unmistakeable sign of the far-reaching crisis of social reproduction at the heart of customary nationalism. Motsa invites us to look beyond the contingencies of the current moment of popular uprisings, and points at major deficiencies in the education system, further aggravated by the negative mental health effects of COVID-19 restrictions on the student population. On the back of political reform demands that united the school protesters with the broader mass movement, students brought forward a number of more specific grievances and complained, among other things, about the poor quality of school meals, corporal punishment, the lack of teachers, and problems in the implementation of COVID-19 emergency online learning. Drawing from psychosocial theories, Motsa provides a sensitive discussion of the thorny issue of protesters' violence, showing how we can productively deal with this topic without descending into superficial moralising or one-sided condemnations in a context where state violence is far more extensive and destructive than any protest.

The leading role played in the recent uprisings by young protesters across all sectors of society shows that there is great potential for political and social change. The move to conceptualise political conflict in generational terms, in African studies at least, often leads to discussions about male-gerontocratic regimes, with the recurring stereotype of 'Big Men' and their power over majority-youth populations. Instead, the current crisis sees the emergence of intergenerational solidarities between older, post-independence activists associated with unions and civil society organisations, and a younger generation of activists newly drawing on regional and transnational ties and technologies, especially embodied in online dialogues and the Multi-Stakeholder Forum. Hlandze's (this issue) research shows us what has worked and what has become an impasse in the past, which are key resources to move forward.

We believe these synergies can engender conversations that enable a new generation of emaSwati and other scholars in and of Africa to reclaim, rewrite, and newly write histories of activism within eSwatini, the region, and transnationally, as well as build an actionable toolkit to use across many sectors in the struggle for democracy. The toolkit may also include rewriting or re-envisioning what custom or Swatiness can mean, be, or do, from the ground up. A radical anti-custom stance, as implemented by some post-colonial political movements elsewhere on the continent (McGovern 2012), has the potential to alienate citizens who already know custom to be flexible, adaptable, and politically useful, in whatever forms it may take to mobilise consensus or speak to members of the country's diverse communities. A new national consensus will be needed to build a solid and democratic dispensation that comes after the current one, and it will need a great degree of social cohesion to succeed in the daunting task ahead of dealing with deep inequalities and the intensifying crisis.

On a final, more sombre note: it is very challenging to conduct academic research and hold academic debates in the current context. As white anthropologists based in the Global North, our privilege is made even starker for we can write freely about these topics without fearing for our lives and livelihoods or those of our loved ones. This is not the case for Swati scholars in the country and in the diaspora. The unprecedented level of state violence has hugely curtailed academic freedom at a time when academic research is badly needed to support citizens and activists in their crucial work for a

progressive alternative that ends the bloodshed and brings equality and prosperity for all emaSwati. Academic freedom is only one of many pressing issues. EmaSwati will need all the support they can muster to get through these dire times. Hopefully, SADC countries and the international community as a whole will do more to hold the king and his government accountable for their gross human rights violations, and to steer a democratic transition that restores peace and stability in eSwatini.

Notes

1. Twitter was key in drawing global attention to the 2021 protests through hashtags like #SwaziLivesMatter, #eswatiniisbleeding, #eswatiniprotests, #kungahlwakwenile, and others, and as a space of open, public discussion. Another major website, www.eswatiniprotests.org, documents the ongoing state violence and legal incursions faced by the pro-democracy movement. *The Unthinkable*, a 2021 film by Comfort Ndzinisa, features dozens of interviews with injured protestors and families of those who were killed (available on YouTube, accessed 28 May 2023: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WOVa5bVZFU). Among the many excellent reports from the ground, reportage by Cebelihle Mbuyisa and Magnificent Mndebele stands out for its quality and bravery (e.g., Mbuyisa and Mndebele 2021a, 2021b). *The Bridge* (http://www.swazibridge.com/) has emerged as a leading online publisher of in-depth commentary featuring civil society and pro-democracy perspectives.
2. Before taking up his government post in 2018, the late Prime Minister Ambrose Dlamini was CEO of MTN Eswatini, the largest mobile telecoms operator in the country. Neal Rijkenberg, finance minister in Dlamini's government and the current one, founded and headed Montigny, the largest private timber business in the country. Montigny is partly owned by the Public Service Pensions Fund and the Eswatini National Provident Fund (Montigny n.d.). Both funds are mandatory pension contribution schemes that are closely aligned with government interests. MTN Eswatini's largest shareholder is the parastatal Eswatini Posts & Telecommunications Corporation (MTN Eswatini n.d.), and king Mswati III has a 10% stake in the company (Ngatane 2021).
3. World Bank DataBank. Accessed 21 May 2023: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=SZ&most_recent_value_desc=true
4. World Bank Databank. Accessed 21 May 2023: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.UMIC?locations=SZ
5. From anecdotal and ethnographic evidence (Forrester and Laterza 2014), we can guess that virtually all people in this group are likely to be black emaSwati.
6. World Bank Databank. Accessed 21 May 2023: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=SZ
7. World Bank Databank. Accessed 21 May 2023: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=SZ
8. World Bank Databank. Accessed 28 May 2023: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=SZ
9. Legislated minimum wages in eSwatini are very low. For instance, even with the recent increase in 2022, the minimum wage for domestic workers is now 1500 emalangeni per month (N. Nkambule 2022), while in South Africa it amounts to roughly 5340 rand per month for the same amount of hours worked (South African Government 2023); the two currencies are equivalent as part of Common Monetary Area agreements, developed out of colonial, apartheid-era, and postcolonial multilateral economic policies in the region.
10. The term township refers to a low-income urban residential area.
11. There are efforts to create land registers for customary areas, increase land tenure security, reduce land conflicts and make allocation of available land more efficient. The Sustainable Land Administration and Management (SLAM) project (2016–2019), an initiative of the eSwatini government funded by the EU, carried out a pilot for a land recording system in several

rural areas. Project documents are available here: https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/sustainable-land-administration-and-management/documents (Accessed 21 May 2023). One possible reason for the lack of such data is to be found in the lack of transparency from government and the monarchy themselves, who are reluctant to release data on land ownership on SNL and title deed land – effectively keeping out of public scrutiny not only their own land interests, but also those of foreign capital and white communities.

12. The *iNcwala* is the main ritual of kingship, taking place over several weeks and involving men from all over the country organised in age-regiments, who bond with their king, a key protagonist in the activities. The *uMhlanga* reed dance revolves around the queen mother and involves Swati young maidens (also organised in regiments) who engage in several rites over eight days – the king is present at the main dance, towards the end of the festival.
13. The most influential case of biopolitical theories on and from Africa is without a doubt Achille Mbembe's (e.g., 2003, 2017) ground-breaking work on necropolitics, but the explicit use of biopolitics as a framework has not generally been applied to issues of custom – exceptions include Mbembe's (2001) own conceptualisation of custom in his landmark book *On The Postcolony*, and Decoteau (2013). There are however many key contributions to a holistic understanding of the politics of life under customary rule in African studies that present highly resonant insights that could be reinterpreted and developed further into a more explicit biopolitics of custom – see for instance Moore (1986), Devisch (1993, 2017), Nyamnjoh (2017) and Nhemachena (2017). For eSwatini, see also Laterza, Forrester, and Mususa (2013) and Golomski (2018).
14. Here too people of mixed race have been socially constructed into a separate category named as the "Coloured" community, in line with apartheid and post-apartheid categories of race in neighbouring South Africa.
15. Despite repeated attacks by the royal regime, *The Nation* magazine, led by veteran editor Bheki Makhubu, remains the most reputable source of independent and objective commentary in eSwatini.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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