
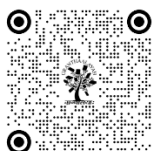


# THE GOND ARTS AND HANDICRAFTS SHOWCASE THE CULTURAL TRADITION OF THE GOND TRIBE IN KEONJHAR DISTRICT

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## ABSTRACT

Odisha's tribal heritage is rich and diverse and among its many communities the Gond people of Keonjhar district stand out for their vibrant cultural traditions. This study focuses on the Gonds' artistic expressions especially their paintings, crafts and traditional dances that continue to thrive in northern Odisha. The Gond community is particularly known for the intricate artwork they paint on the outer walls of their homes believing it brings good fortune. The research concentrates on Gond art found in the Telkoei and Ghatagaon blocks of Keonjhar examining the unique styles, patterns, motifs, colour choices and materials used. It also highlights the organizations working to preserve and promote this artistic heritage. The Gond people are equally known for their traditional dances including the Sword Dance. While these dances are still performed in Keonjhar and neighbouring Mayurbhanj the Sword Dance is now at risk of disappearing making preservation efforts urgent. The Gond tribe is one of the most significant tribal communities in Odisha and Central India. The name "Gond" is believed to derive from the word "Kond," referring to the lush green hills described in their Dravidian language. The Gonds of Keonjhar are especially recognized for their folk art and cultural traditions painting, music and dance which offer valuable insights for scholars and cultural historians. This study represents a modest but meaningful effort to document and preserve these important aspects of Gond cultural life.

**Keywords:** Gond tribe, Folk Art, Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, Gond Painting

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Odisha and Central India are home to many ancient tribal communities and among them the Gond tribe of Keonjhar in northern Odisha holds a special place. Recognized by scholars as one of the most significant tribal groups in the region the Gonds stand out among the scheduled tribes for their rich cultural heritage. What sets them apart is their vibrant tradition of preserving and passing down unique art forms customs and rituals from one generation to the next. Having lived in these forested regions since time immemorial the Gond people have developed a deep connection with nature which is reflected in their cultural expressions. Their way of life artistic practices and spiritual beliefs are all deeply intertwined with the natural environment they inhabit (Metry, 2019, pp. 13-14). The Gond people one of the largest tribal communities in India has a population of over four million. They are primarily found in Central India and are part of the Dravidian ethnic group. Traditionally they have lived in the dense forests of the Vindhya, Satpura, and Mandla ranges in Madhya Pradesh especially around the Narmada region near the Amarkantak hills. The Government of India

classifies the Gond as a Scheduled Tribe in several states including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. The name "Gond" is believed to come from the Hindi word Kond meaning "green mountains." Because they historically lived in such lush forested regions once referred to as Koi or Koiture they came to be known by this name. Linguistically, the Gondi language belongs to the Dravidian family and is closely related to Telugu and other southern languages. Today, about half of the Gond population speaks Gondi while the rest use Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi. Gond art is one of the most distinctive aspects of their culture. It is known for its intricate designs vibrant Colores and themes drawn from nature, mythology and daily life. This traditional art form which once adorned the walls of their homes has now gained international recognition and has influenced many contemporary artistic styles around the world (District Statistical Handbook Keonjhar, 2011, pp.1-2). Gond art and culture have a deep-rooted tradition of storytelling through painting. These artworks often depict gods, spirits, everyday life and festive celebrations. Especially during festivals the paintings become more elaborate reflecting the tribe's rich heritage and deep spiritual beliefs. Gond art is more than decoration it serves as a powerful expression of identity connecting the community across time and place. The vibrant designs that adorn their homes are full of symbolic patterns and natural motifs breathing life into their traditions and preserving their cultural memory (Geogaonkar, 2007, pp 13-16). Traditional painting is an important folk-art form among the Gond tribe in Odisha's Keonjhar region. Using age-old techniques and natural materials Gond artists create unique and meaningful works that reflect their cultural heritage. These paintings often feature animals like birds, tigers and snakes each carrying symbolic meaning. Through their art Gond painters not only preserve their traditions but also share their stories and knowledge with the wider world.

## **2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The Gonds are one of the oldest tribal communities in India traditionally engaged in hunting, gathering forest produce, farming, warfare, simple trade, and the use of herbal medicine. They once ruled over large regions of central India and today make up about 13.45% of the country's total Scheduled Tribe population. The earliest Gond kingdoms began to take shape in central India during the 14th and 15th centuries. One prominent leader, Jadurai, defeated the Kalchuri Rajputs to take control of Garha Mandla, while another ruler, Jatba, governed the Deogarh region from 1590 to 1796. The kingdoms of Deogarh and Kherla rose around 1500 AD and flourished for nearly a hundred years. During their reign the Gonds built powerful states and developed unique social and religious systems distinct from the mainstream Hindu traditions (Koreti, 2016, p.4). The Gond community settled in the regions of the Narmada, Vindhya, Satpura and Mekal hills near Amarkantak in Madhya Pradesh, held significant influence over central India during the 14th century. During their rule they built impressive structures such as forts, palaces, temples, reservoirs and lakes leaving behind a rich architectural and cultural legacy that still reflects their power and creativity (Koreti, 2016, pp 288-292).

### **2.1. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

- 1) This study aims to investigate the significant of art, crafts and dance in the Gond tribe culture in Keonjhar district.
- 2) To analyze the structure and purposes of tribal dances in the Keonjhar area of Odisha.
- 3) The study of symbolism, motifs and topics present in Gond art, crafts and dance.

## **3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF FACTS**

### **3.1. GOND PEOPLE**

The Gond people are mainly found in the states of Maharashtra, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, as well as other parts of central India. With a population of around 9 million 4 million of whom live in central India the Gonds are considered one of the largest tribal communities in India South Asia and possibly the world. In northern Odisha they are mostly concentrated in the Satpura Hills the Maikala Range the Son-Deogarh uplands of the Bastar plateau and the Garhjat Hills. The word "Gond" refers to a group of indigenous communities spread across the Deccan region of India. Between the 15th and 18th centuries the Gonds ruled over four major kingdoms in central India: Garha-Mandla, Deogarh, Chanda and Kherla. However, in the 1740s, the Maratha Empire expanded into Gond territory. After defeating the Gond rulers, the Marathas took control of much of their land, marking a significant shift in the region's political landscape (Kumar & Baudh, 2021, pp 764-766). Like many other indigenous communities today, the Gond tribe is facing serious economic challenges. This is the case even though some Gond zamindaris (landed estates) existed until

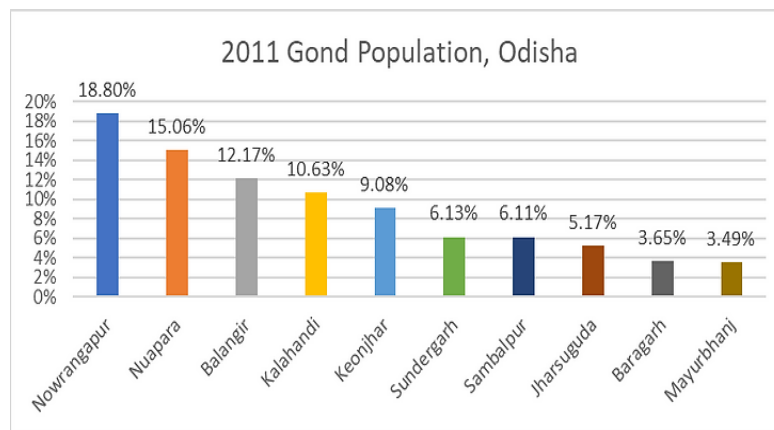
fairly recently. Despite owning large areas of land many members of the Gond community are classified as Scheduled Tribes (ST) and receive targeted support from both the central and state governments in the form of social and financial assistance. Today, most Gonds live in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. A significant population of Gonds also resides in the Achanakmar-Amarkantak Biosphere Reserve (AABR), which stretches across parts of Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal (Joshi & Tiple, 2010).

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Gond people

Source: The researcher from the SCST & RTI Tribal Museum in Bhubaneswar was the one who actually took the picture



**Figure 2** The study examines the distribution of the Gond population in the ten most populous districts of Odisha, India.

Source- <https://images.app.goo.gl/2imq9jHhYsgdsi1V8>

#### 4. ORIGIN OF GOND ART AND NATURE

Gond art is a distinctive and vibrant painting style developed by the Gond tribe one of the major tribal communities of Central India. Found in states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra the Gond people express their creativity through colourful patterns made with dots, lines and bold shapes. This research article takes an anthropological look at Gond tribal art in the Keonjhar district of Odisha. It explores the historical roots of the art form its present condition and the efforts made by institutions and government bodies to preserve this cultural heritage while also helping artisans earn a sustainable livelihood (Malik & Sethi, vol-5(4), 2018, pp 832-836). The Gond kingdoms which once thrived across northern, central and southern parts of India gradually lost their lands and political power under the rule of the Mughals and later the British. As colonial control expanded the Gonds' traditional way of life

became increasingly vulnerable. The Pardhans, who were once the Gond community's musicians and storytellers saw their musical traditions decline significantly during the Mughal period and even more so under British rule? Colonial policies heavy taxation and land seizures added to their hardships leading to the erosion of their cultural and economic stability.

“In this kingdom of the English  
How hard it is to live  
to pay the cattle tax  
we have sold a cow  
to pay the forest tax  
we have to sell a bullock  
how are we to get our food?”

The Gonds have long preserved their rich cultural heritage through music, festivals, rituals, songs and dances. These traditions were central to their identity and way of life. However, in recent times as many young Gond men have migrated to cities in search of work the community's social standing has weakened. The Pardhans once respected as storytellers and keepers of family histories and myths have gradually given up their traditional bardic roles. Faced with economic hardship many have been forced to take up manual labour and other low-paying jobs just to survive leading to a significant loss in cultural continuity (Geogaonkar, 2007, pp 124-126).

## 5. STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

In Odisha, Gond tribal paintings are a traditional art form commonly seen on the outer walls of homes often covering areas as large as eight to ten feet. The walls are first coated with a mixture of black or white clay and cow dung locally called “guru or gar” to create a smooth surface. The artwork features elements from everyday life plants, animals, birds, natural scenes and folklore filled with patterns made of dashes, dots, curves and other shapes. The Gonds use natural materials to make their colours. Black is made from soil, yellow from riverbank mud, and white from calcium-rich stones. Charcoal and lime are also widely used especially when painting house walls. The process starts with a black outline which is later filled in with intricate patterns once the surface is washed and dried. A popular and recurring symbol in Gond art is the “Tree of Life,” which forms the heart of many mythological designs. Often, each painting tells a story. One well-known tale is about a peacock with beautiful feathers but small, unattractive feet a reminder that even the most beautiful beings have their imperfections. For generations Adivasi families have used these paintings not just for decoration but to keep their culture and stories alive through art (Bharadwaj, 2014, pp- 7-9).

## 6. THEMES

Gond art is deeply connected to the belief that creating beautiful meaningful artwork can bring good fortune. For the Gond tribe nature is sacred every element from hills and rivers to rocks and trees is believed to have a spirit? This deep reverence for nature is reflected in their art, which often features local flora, animals, and even mythical creatures. Gond artists blend tradition with modern influences, incorporating contemporary symbols like airplanes, bicycles, and cars alongside traditional motifs. Their work also includes depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses, as well as tribal deities and spirits, showcasing the cultural diversity of the region. The art is a celebration of the bond between humans and the natural world. Common themes include flowers, trees, divine beings, and spirits—both good and evil. Paintings, known as Bhittichitra are often made on the floors or the walls of homes, symbolizing devotion and spiritual belief. Many artists take inspiration from local customs, rituals and festivals, using their artwork not just as decoration but as a way to honour tradition and keep their cultural identity alive (Thamanna& Subramani, 2023, pp 572-585).

## 7. THE GOND'S PAINTING METHODS AND FORMS IN THE KEONJHAR DITRICT AREA

The Gond tribe in the Keonjhar region of Odisha practices a unique and deeply meaningful painting tradition that reflects their rich cultural heritage. Their art is characterized by intricate designs made using dots, fine lines, dashes and geometric shapes, creating visually captivating and original pieces. These paintings go beyond decoration they carry deep symbolic meaning, representing nature, emotions, spiritual beliefs and the community's connection to the



environment. Gond artists use natural materials like plants, minerals and soil to make their colours. Each shade holds a particular meaning symbolizing different aspects of life and the natural world. A special feature of their technique is the use of chhuimati a type of white clay that provides a smooth surface and enhances the sharpness and brightness of the artwork. More than just visual art, Gond paintings are a form of storytelling. They help preserve the tribe's oral traditions, myths and cultural values. Through these artworks, stories and wisdom are passed down from generation to generation. Even in modern times, this traditional art form remains relevant, serving as a bridge between the past and present while continuing to express the identity and spirit of the Gond people (Rao, vol-5(5-9), 2018, p. 975)

**Figure 2**



**Figure 3** A Gond painter was observed creating a mural on the exterior wall of a home in Telkoei, Keonjhar District.

Source: Mahapatra, G. S. (2017) "Visual Art of the Gond Problems and Prospects of Documentation and Exhibition in Museum". *International Journal of Research in Engineering, IT and Social Sciences*, 7(8), 46-48.

## 8. DEVELOPMENT OF GOND ART IN KEONJHAR DISTRICT

Gond art which began as a traditional form of wall painting in Gond homes has now grown into a globally admired art movement. This transformation was largely driven by Jangarh Singh Shyam a pioneering Gond artist who developed the Jangarh Kalam style. His work helped shift Gond painting from its traditional roots to a more contemporary form using bold colours, fine detail and modern themes. At its core Gond art is a form of storytelling. Each painting tells a tale be it an ancient myth a folk legend or a message about the environment. Common subjects include trees, animals, stars and gods all reflecting the Gond community's deep spiritual bond with nature. Artists often fill larger shapes with repeated patterns like dots, lines, and curves creating a rhythmic and visually engaging effect. Today, Gond art has found admirers far beyond India. Art lovers and collectors around the world appreciate its beauty and cultural depth. Gond artists have also embraced modern mediums applying their traditional designs to fabrics home décor items and even digital platforms. Despite its commercial success and global reach Gond art continues to represent the heritage, identity and creative spirit of the Gond people. Contemporary artists honour their traditions while also exploring new stories and styles keeping the art form alive and evolving (Mahapatra, S.G. 2017, p-47). The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts has carried out an extensive survey of folk painting traditions in Madhya Pradesh with a special focus on styles like Bhumi Chitra, Bhatti Chitra and Gond art. In Odisha's Keonjhar district particularly in the Telkoei area, traditional Gond paintings continue to be practiced by both men and women from the community. These artworks vividly capture the Gond people's connection with their deities, dance, nature and the stories and legends passed down through generations. The cultural richness of the Gond community in Keonjhar has been carefully recorded and preserved, highlighting their unique artistic and spiritual heritage. This effort not only celebrates their history but also helps ensure that their traditions continue to thrive and receive the recognition they deserve (Goswami & Yadav, 2020, pp 35-50).

## 9. TATTOOING (KHEDA)

One can depict the aesthetic sense of Gond through a variety of approaches. Not only do they possess a unique aesthetic sensibility that sets them apart from ours but they also heavily emphasize tattooing, a practice that is common among women of the Gond ethnic group. Among the groups of women who have the most tattoos, it is quite probable that the Gond ladies are among the most noticeable. There are aesthetic and religious significances associated with tattooing, in addition to the medicinal advantages it offers, tattooing has aesthetic and religious significance. Women who do not have any tattoos on their bodies are considered unsuitable for admittance into heaven, according to the belief. Moreover, the belief holds that the individual who receives a tattoo is the one who will ultimately achieve immortality. Additionally, people view tattooing as a therapeutic practice for again. Tattooing is one of the many ways people judge women's beauty.

## 10. PROCESS

Godna is a traditional tattooing practice of the Gond community, rich in technique and meaning. The process begins by rubbing mustard oil on the skin to soften it and prepare it for the tattoo. The ink is made by mixing kajal a black substance made from burning flaxseeds with vidali oil, creating a pigment that lasts a long time. The Godharin or tattoo artist then uses sharp bamboo sticks or thorns from the Babool tree to draw symbolic patterns on the body. Today many artists use steel needle clusters for more precise designs. If the skin bleeds, the Godharin gently applies ink over the wound using the Babool tree's natural healing qualities to help the skin recover and avoid scarring. The process can be painful, and women often cry out during the session. But as they do, the Godharin chants spiritual verses to help them stay strong and calm. For the Gond people, this is more than just body art it's a sacred ritual that connects them to their roots and transforms pain into a meaningful, spiritual journey.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 4** This photograph depicts the tattoos that members of the Gond tribe of the Keonjhar region, both men and women, have on their legs.

Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/q8scpGNSZZ8863Rg9>

## 11. JEWELLERY AND ORNAMENTS OF GOND OF KEONJHAR

The Gond people who live in the highland regions of Odisha have a long and rich tradition of expressing their culture and identity through jewellery. Both men and women wear ornaments made from natural materials like beads, shells and bones as well as metals such as aluminium, iron, silver and gold. Their jewellery includes items like headbands, necklaces, earrings, bangles and anklets. Ear piercings and sometimes nose piercings are common, often decorated with colourful beads that add to their beauty. But for the Gond community jewellery is more than just decoration. These pieces hold deep cultural and spiritual meaning especially during festivals, weddings, and other important ceremonies. Jewellery reflects a person's social status connects them to their community and often carries religious symbolism. While traditional attire and ornaments are still deeply valued modern fashion has started to influence how the Gond people dress. In many cases traditional and modern styles blend together creating a fresh yet meaningful way to express identity. By wearing both old and new designs the Gond community continues to honour its roots while embracing change (Deogaonkar, 1938, pp 59-61).

**Figure 4 & 5**

Figure No.4 &5: The Gond people of Keonjhar district in Odisha traditionally wear Mali (beaded necklaces) and Bahubandha (armlets) as part of their cultural attire.

**Source** The photograph was personally taken by the researcher at the SCSTRTI Tribal Museum in Bhubaneswar.

## 12. CRAFTS OF THE GOND TRIBE IN KEONJHAR DISTRICT

The Gond tribe, one of India's largest indigenous communities has a deep and practical understanding of bamboo and its many everyday uses. They are especially known for their skilful and eco-friendly ways of working with bamboo, harvesting it without harming the roots so the plant can grow back naturally. Gond artisans turn bamboo into fine strips and thin pieces, which they weave into useful household items like mats and baskets. They even build full-sized doors out of bamboo, showing both their creativity and how strong and reliable the material is. Bamboo is a vital part of daily life for the Gond people. They use it to make sharp tools for cutting vegetables, craft bows and arrows, and build their homes and huts from it. These bamboo houses are smartly designed to handle all kinds of weather, keeping the inside cool or warm as needed. Bamboo also helps them start fires, which are essential for cooking, staying warm, and performing important rituals. The Gond tribe's bamboo work is a reflection of their deep connection to nature and their ability to live in harmony with it. Their traditional knowledge not only supports their way of life but also serves as a valuable example of sustainable living for the modern world (Patel, 2005, p-3).

## 13. WOOD CARVING

The Gond tribe of Dahibahali in Patna is known for its rich cultural heritage which is beautifully reflected in their traditional woodwork. One of the most unique examples of this is their hand-carved wooden combs made from Saguan wood, or teak. These combs aren't just simple grooming tools they are a form of artistic expression, showing the creativity and craftsmanship of the Gond people as well as their deep ties to tradition. Each comb is carefully made, with fine attention to detail, and reflects their love for nature and respect for age-old customs. The practice of making these combs is still alive today, standing as a powerful reminder of the Gond community's resilience and their environmentally conscious way of life (Tiwari, A.K, 2015, vol-3, p-46).

**Figure 7**

**Figure 7** The women of the Gond tribe in Dahibahali, located in Odisha's Keonjhar district, traditionally used wooden combs as part of their daily grooming and cultural practices.

Source: The photo was taken by a researcher from the SCST&RTI Tribal Museum in Bhubaneswar.

## 14. BAMBOO WORKS CRAFT

The Sunduria village of Keonjhar district is home to a plethora of bamboo plants in every single village. Utilized for the production of fishing nets and the construction of dwellings, baskets, Kan wads (load carrying poles), musical instruments, and food, it has been an inextricable component of the way of life in this district. For the Gond people, who make their living by manufacturing items made with bamboo, bamboo serves as the foundation for their means of subsistence. As part of the gotia client- patronage connections that they have with farmers, they trade some of the baskets and other utilities that they have manufactured for grain. The region widely practices the skill of making things with bamboo, in addition to these specialized goods. Policies implemented by the government in recent years have, in a sense, acknowledged the essential role that bamboo plays in the lives of the people of Keonjhar. These policies have initiatives for the growth of bamboo as a cash crop. In terms of traditional tribal handcraft, Keonjhar is the most important centre. Among the tribal craftspeople of Keonjhar, the most important source of income comes from handicrafts, which come after the collecting of forest produce (Tiwari. A.K, 2015, vol-3, p. 46-49)

## 15. PROCESSING BAMBOO FOR HANDICRAFTS INVOLVES PREPARING IT INTO A POWDER

### Traditional processing

- 1) Extraction: This substance aids in the removal of starch and improves permeability for future treatment through diffusion and pressure.
- 2) Procedure: Collect and preserve culms and splits in flowing water or storage using sinker loads for total submersion and weekly water replacement to prevent bacterial proliferation and discoloration.
- 3) Smoking: Smoked culms are typically stored above a hearth or fireplace, reducing moisture content and inhibiting biological decomposition, while smoke deposits from a protective coating and cover cutting.
- 4) Drilling Bamboo: The liquid I injected into the bamboos during the chemical treatment process for easy penetration.

### Bamboo processing techniques are widely used in various crafts:

- 1) The process involves selecting bamboos
- 2) Cutting them
- 3) Sizing and making slivers
- 4) Colouring them
- 5) Polishing them
- 6) SWORD DANCE

The Gond tribe's sword dance in Keonjhar district, Odisha is a dynamic and spirited traditional performance that embodies their cultural history. Generally, people perform this dance during festive events communal assemblies and significant festivities. It symbolizes valour solidarity and the warrior spirit of the tribe. During the performance dancers brandish swords and shields demonstrating remarkable agility and synchronization. The dancers move in synchrony with the rhythms of ancient drums and various tribal instruments generating an electrifying ambiance. They often coordinate their actions highlighting their historical connections to martial traditions. The performers' dress enhances the visual allure of the dance. They often don traditional tribal attire frequently embellished with vibrant accessories, feathers, and beads. Dance serves not just as entertainment but also as a medium for transmitting narratives, rituals, and cultural values.



**Figure 8**

**Figure 8** The scene shows young girls from Balipokhari village in Keonjhar district performing a traditional Sword folk dance.

Sources: This photograph was captured by a researcher at the Kali Puja Mandap in Keonjhar town, where the vibrant atmosphere and cultural spirit of the festival were beautifully preserved through the lens.

## 16. CONCLUSION

The cultural legacy of the Gond tribe in Keonjhar district is a testament to their enduring relationship with nature, community and tradition. This study has highlighted how their art, dance, crafts and ornamentation are not merely aesthetic practices but vital expressions of identity, spirituality and ecological wisdom. From the symbolic motifs of Gond wall paintings to the sacred rituals of tattooing and the intricate craftsmanship of bamboo and wood, each element reflects a deep-rooted connection to ancestral knowledge and the environment. The traditional Sword Dance, the vibrant use of natural materials in jewellery and crafts and the storytelling power of their visual art all contribute to a living heritage that continues to evolve while retaining its core values. Yet, as modernity and migration influence tribal life many of these traditions face the risk of fading. This makes efforts toward documentation, preservation and community-based promotion more urgent than ever. Through this research an attempt has been made to honour the Gond people's contributions to India's cultural mosaic and to emphasize the need for sustained recognition and support of their artistic and cultural expressions. The Gond heritage of Keonjhar is not just a relic of the past but a dynamic, living tradition that offers valuable lessons for sustainable living, resilience, and the celebration of cultural diversity.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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